

The quest for evolutionary socialism is neither a conventional political history nor a traditional “historiography of political ideas,” but is an examination of past and present interactions between European social democratic politics and socialist political ideas. Since no study of Bernstein’s life and work has appeared since Peter Gay’s 1952 study, *The dilemma of democratic socialism*, Steger’s book is a timely response to the need for a new, comprehensive biography of the German “Father of Marxist Revisionism,” as it not only incorporates recent academic developments, but it also addresses current debates on the “end of socialism,” as a result of the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the chronic ailments of European social democracy.

This study is set within the historical context of the *fin-de-siècle* European labor movement, and thus Steger argues that Bernstein’s contribution to socialist theory is directly relevant to the current process of rethinking the traditional project of the democratic left along more libertarian lines. Bernstein’s “evolutionary socialism,” interpreted as a quest for liberty, solidarity, and distributive justice, is still the most appropriate vehicle for the extension of political and economic democracy and the reconstruction of the sphere of civil society. As Steger stresses, the future of social democracy lies in its capacity to heed Bernstein’s call for critical self-reflection, theoretical renewal and reorientation toward the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment tradition.

The quest for evolutionary socialism

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Eduard Bernstein and social democracy

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For my wife Perle and my family

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Abbreviations

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| <i>Adler BW</i> | <i>Victor Adlers Briefwechsel mit August Bebel und Karl Kautsky, sowie Briefe von und an I. Auer, E. Bernstein, A. Braun, H. Dietz, F. Ebert, W. Liebknecht, H. Müller, und P. Singer, collected and with commentary by F. Adler, Vienna, 1954</i> |
| <i>Adler A</i> | <i>Victor Adler Archive, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam</i> |
| <i>Bebel BWE</i> | <i>August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels, edited by Werner Blumenberg, The Hague, 1965</i> |
| <i>Bebel BWK</i> | <i>August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky, edited by Karl Kautsky Jr., Assen, 1971</i> |
| <i>Bernstein A</i> | <i>Eduard Bernstein Archive, IISH, Amsterdam</i> |
| <i>Bernstein BWE</i> | <i>Eduard Bernsteins Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels, edited by Helmut Hirsch, Assen, 1970</i> |
| <i>C I</i> | <i>Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. I, edited by Friedrich Engels and translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, New York, 1967</i> |
| <i>DDS</i> | <i>Peter Gay, The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx, 2nd ed., New York, 1962</i> |
| <i>EB</i> | <i>Francis L. Carsten, Eduard Bernstein 1850–1932: eine politische Biographie, Munich, 1993</i> |
| <i>Engels BWK</i> | <i>Friedrich Engels' Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky, edited by Benedikt Kautsky, Vienna, 1955</i> |
| <i>ES</i> | <i>Eduard Bernstein, "Entwicklungsgang eines Sozialisten," in Die Volkswirtschaftslehre in Selbstdarstellungen, edited by Felix Meiner, Leipzig, 1924</i> |
| <i>MECW</i> | <i>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works, 50 vols. (incomplete), London, 1975–</i> |
| <i>MEW</i> | <i>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Werke, 39 vols. Berlin, 1972–8</i> |
| <i>MS</i> | <i>Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896–1898, edited by Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor, Cambridge, 1988</i> |

| | |
|-----------|--|
| <i>NZ</i> | <i>Neue Zeit</i> |
| <i>PS</i> | Eduard Bernstein, <i>The Preconditions of Socialism</i> , edited and translated by Henry Tudor, Cambridge, 1993 |
| <i>SM</i> | <i>Sozialistische Monatshefte</i> |

Introduction: the nature of Bernstein's quest

More than thirty years ago, Sidney Hook, the late historian of socialist thought, lamented the fact that "Eduard Bernstein has not yet come into his own."¹ Though Bernstein, the "Father of Marxist Revisionism," escaped the cruel fate of many of his socialist contemporaries who fell prey to historical oblivion, Hook's lucid observation continued to remain true, at least in the Anglo-American context, until the late 1980s.

When I began my study of Bernstein's life and political thought in 1989, Peter Gay's important, but dated volume still represented the only full-scale Bernstein biography available in English.² Within the next three years, however, monumental historical changes gave my scholarly efforts new significance: the Berlin Wall crumbled, the Iron Curtain disappeared, and the Soviet Union dissolved. Indeed, the death of Marxism-Leninism rekindled lively discussions on the fate of socialism in general, including the ailing Western European model of social democracy.³ Critical questions abounded regarding the feasibility of any radically egalitarian reforms in our era of globally integrated capitalism. A century after the famous "Revisionist Controversy" of German social democracy,

¹ Sidney Hook, "Introduction," in Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. xx.

² *DDS*.

³ See, for example, William K. Tabb, ed. *The Future of Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); Thomas Meyer, *Was bleibt vom Sozialismus?* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1991); and *Demokratischer Sozialismus – Soziale Demokratie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991); Robin Blackburn, "Fin de Siècle: Socialism after the Crash," in *New Left Review* 185 (1991), pp. 5–66; Stephen Eric Bronner *Socialism Unbound* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and *Moments of Decision* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Christiane Lemke and Gary Marks, eds. *The Crisis of Socialism in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992); Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993); Joseph V. Femia, *Marxism and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993); John Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994); Ronald Aronson, *After Marxism* (New York: Guilford, 1994); Peter Beilharz, *Postmodern Socialism* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1994); and Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, *Marxism in the Postmodern Age* (New York: Guilford, 1994); and Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters, and Kris Deschouwer, eds. *Social Democracy in a Post-Communist Europe* (Portland, OR: F. Cass, 1994).

Bernstein's model of "evolutionary socialism" became once again the focus of heated debates.

Indeed, a number of new publications made accessible translations of both Bernstein's early and later writings.⁴ Other authors revisited the historical connections between the Wilhelmine Empire and the rise of German social democracy, as well as scrutinizing the various intellectual currents within revisionist Marxist thought;⁵ and still others probed the extent to which Bernstein's theoretical framework might provide badly needed impulses for the survival of a distinct political tradition stretching back 150 years.⁶

My study addresses these current debates on socialism arising from both the sudden collapse of Marxism-Leninism and the crisis of European social democracy. As I see it, Bernstein's neglected contribution to socialist theory speaks directly to the current process of rethinking the traditional project of the democratic Left. At the same time, this book seeks to answer the urgent need for a new Bernstein biography that incorporates recent scholarly developments on the topic. As a result, my study represents neither a conventional political history nor a traditional "historiography of political ideas," but an examination of the past and

⁴ See, for example, MS; PS, Till Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky: Entstehung und Wandlung des sozialdemokratischen Parteimarxismus im Spiegel ihrer Korrespondenz 1879–1932* (Köln: Böhlau, 1992). See also my *Selected Writings of Eduard Bernstein, 1900–1921* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1996).

⁵ See, for example, Veli-Matti Rautio, *Die Bernstein Debatte: die politisch-ideologischen Strömungen und die Parteideologie der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands 1898–1903* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1994); Nicholas Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); John H. Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky: Marxism, Revolution & Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994); EB; Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); Jack Jacobs, *On Socialism and the Jewish Question after Marx* (New York: NYU Press, 1993); Stanley Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993); H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy: Kautsky, Bernstein, and the Meaning of Marxism 1895–1898* (New York: Garland, 1992); Peter Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1992); Gary P. Steenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

⁶ See, for example, Giles Radice, "The Case for Revisionism," in *The Political Quarterly* 59 (1988), pp. 404–415; Heinz Klegler, "Evolutionärer Sozialismus. Oder: warum noch einmal Bernstein lesen?," in *Widerspruch* 19/90 (1990), pp. 38–52; Stephen Eric Bronner, "Eduard Bernstein and the Logic of Revisionism," in *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 53–75; Horst Heimann, *Die Voraussetzungen des Demokratischen Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn: Dietz, 1991); Doug Brown, "Thorstein Veblen Meets Eduard Bernstein: Toward an Institutional Theory of Mobilization Politics," in *Journal of Economic Issues* 25.3 (September 1991), pp. 689–708; and Peter Beilharz, "The Life and Times of Social Democracy," in Peter Beilharz, Gillian Robinson, and John Rundell, eds. *Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 54–68. See also my "Historical Materialism and Ethics: Eduard Bernstein's Revisionist Perspective," in *History of European Ideas* 14.5 (1992), pp. 647–663.

present interaction between the world of European social democratic politics and socialist political ideas. Indeed, my concerns are just as much hermeneutical, political, and normative as they are historical.

No doubt, German social democracy provides the inseparable social context of Bernstein's political theory. Torn from its historical soil, our understanding of his "evolutionary socialism" would remain woefully abstract, sterile, and clouded. Indeed, one might look upon Bernstein's life and thought as a microcosmic reflection of the first hundred years in the history of the German labor movement: he and his party underwent the same ideological development leading from a Lassallean socialist eclecticism to a Marxist purism, which, ultimately, culminated in a new eclecticism enriched by both traditions.

The natural starting point for an interpretation of Bernstein's political thought is his early critique of orthodox German Marxism, presented in his 1896–8 essays in the socialist journals *Neue Zeit* and *Vorwärts*, as well as in his more comprehensive 1899 study, *The Preconditions of Socialism*. However, it would be a grave mistake to neglect Bernstein's instructive later writings. Overlooking the fact that he himself repeatedly stressed the "theoretical progress," reflected in his later work,⁷ most scholars of European social democracy have often either trivialized his later oeuvre as "political journalism," or bypassed it altogether.⁸ "By 1900," so goes the verdict of his most prominent biographer, "Bernstein had done his theoretical work."⁹ This judgment is echoed in the comments of a recent observer who noted that, "[Bernstein] added nothing significant to the position he had developed in the 1890s."¹⁰ Such hasty pronouncements leave the reader with the erroneous impression that, besides his role as a vociferous critic of orthodox Marxism, Bernstein failed to provide new impulses to socialist theory. Nothing can be further from the truth. In fact, the more "constructive" dimension of Bernstein's political thought, concentrating on problems of democratization, political morality, international relations, and social reform, emerged in more detail only after his return from his London exile in 1901.

Therefore, my study seeks to provide a more balanced assessment of Bernstein's political theory by giving equal weight to his two equally important creative periods. First, there is his early revisionism, dominated by his 1895–9 critique of the young, "Hegelian" Marx and his allegedly

⁷ *ES*, p. 41.

⁸ Susanne Miller, "Bernstein's Political Position 1914–1920," in Roger Fletcher, ed. *Bernstein to Brandt: A Short History of German Social Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), p. 101.

⁹ *DDS*, p. 255. See also Thomas Meyer's similar assessment, *Bernsteins konstruktiver Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977), pp. 5, 33–34.

¹⁰ Tudor, "Introduction," in *PS*, p. xxxv.

“Blanquist” tendencies. During this phase, Bernstein sought to reveal the fundamental weaknesses of orthodox Marxism while introducing the basic elements of his ethical reformism. Clinging to the idea that Marxist doctrine could be simply “revised” by “developing the evolutionary principle” inherent in the mature writings of Marx and Engels,¹¹ Bernstein actually ended up changing the entire *Gestalt* of Marxist socialism.

Second, in his more constructive later phase, Bernstein endeavored to expand and refine his evolutionary socialism by advocating an ethical social reformism which was designed to prepare and guide concrete political initiatives. Moreover, in his capacity as member of the German Reichstag for more than two decades, Bernstein was in the unique position to explore the crucial interface between theory and practice from both ends; an opportunity denied to most prominent socialist theorists, including Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Georg Plekhanov, and Rosa Luxemburg.

Yet, party theorists – particularly Kautsky and Luxemburg – played leading roles in questioning the “feasibility” of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism. Indeed, there are but few figures in the history of socialist thought who have been more criticized than Eduard Bernstein. An autodidact, social historian, elected representative to the German Reichstag, editor, journalist, political thinker, and theoretical “heir apparent” to Friedrich Engels, Bernstein exchanged his early reputation as a committed Marxist socialist for far less noble distinctions, among them, “traitor of the working class” (Lenin) and “opportunistic philistine” (Luxemburg). Advancing an extensive critique of Marx’s and Engels’ “scientific socialism,” Bernstein forfeited his potential claim to socialist leadership by setting off the famous *fin-de-siècle* “Revisionist Controversy” in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

To the ears of his former friends and German party leaders August Bebel and Karl Kautsky, Bernstein’s liberal-sounding arguments not only recast their decidedly Marxist libretto, but clearly rang with the sentimental, ethical tones of “bourgeois” social reformists like Friedrich Albert Lange, John Stuart Mill, and Sidney Webb. Such “revisionist talk” bolstered their suspicion that Bernstein, living in his London exile for more than a decade, had acquired the insidious “British liberal disease” from his new Fabian and radical-liberal company. Mocking his model of “evolutionary socialism” and flatly rejecting his repeated calls for a class-transcending, left-liberal democratic alliance against Kaiser Wilhelm’s authoritarianism, the orthodox Marxist SPD leadership instead set out to create the damaging image of Eduard Bernstein, the “petty-bourgeois opportunist.”

¹¹ PS, p. 28.

On the other hand, social-minded German intellectuals of various liberal shades, like Friedrich Naumann, Eugen Richter, Franz Oppenheimer, Lujo Brentano, Theodor Mommsen, and Max Weber, resented both Bernstein's suspicion of their market-based economics and his seemingly "exaggerated" commitment to "radical" forms of egalitarianism. Moreover, Bernstein's Kantian ethical ideals appeared to them to be far too flimsy for a *Realpolitik* based on more tangible values such as the defense of "national community" and "German national interests." Sacrificing genuine conceptual commonalities that could have well been translated into valuable political capital against the Imperial Government, national-liberal leaders instead chose to highlight their philosophical differences with Bernstein.

As a result of this ideological inflexibility toward Bernstein's political vision in both socialist and liberal camps, decades passed without the formation of a firm democratic alliance against the autocratic rule of "Iron and Rye" in Germany. Sporadic attempts to reach out across the political spectrum (like Naumann's courageous rallying cry for a united liberal-socialist bloc with decidedly nationalist leanings) foundered on the perpetual factionalism among German liberals and the SPD leadership's rigid adherence to a "well-tested strategy of splendid isolation" – its refusal to form political coalitions with any parts of the German "bourgeoisie."¹²

In the meantime, Bernstein's theoretical model of "evolutionary socialism," or "liberal socialism,"¹³ languished in a political no-man's land. Yet, largely atheoretical SPD *Praktiker* ("pragmatists") shrewdly used his initiative in their efforts to link his attack on orthodox Marxism with their own instrumentalist agenda. Thanks to their skillful tactical manoeuvres, Bernstein's "revisionism" acquired even more negative connotations, eventually becoming synonymous with "socialist imperialism" and a form of "philosophical eclecticism," which Rosa Luxemburg seethingly characterized as "a pile of rubbish, in which the debris of all systems, the pieces of thought of various great and small minds, find a common resting place."¹⁴ The echoes of such assessments can still be heard today in Cornel West's equally sharp criticism that "Bernstein . . .

¹² For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Beverly Heckart, *From Bassemann to Bebel: The Grand Bloc's Quest for Reform in the Kaiserreich, 1900–1914* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974).

¹³ Bernstein's definition of socialism as "organized liberalism," and his general fondness for the liberal ideals he expressed on many occasions, permits such wording without violating his theoretical design. Expanding on Bernstein's arguments, the Italian socialist Carlo Rosselli used the term "liberal socialism" as the title of his 1930 book. See Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, ed. by Nadia Urbinati (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994). Throughout this book, the terms "evolutionary socialism" and "liberal socialism" will be used interchangeably.

¹⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 57.

neither formulated a philosophical justification for socialist ethical ideals nor gave these ideals any substantive content.”¹⁵

While Marxists of various schools have been instrumental in setting the framework for downplaying Bernstein’s contribution to socialist theory, many non-Marxists scholars, too, have not been much kinder in their respective appraisals. Criticizing the “eclectic nature of his theoretical enterprise,”¹⁶ such observers point to Bernstein’s allegedly “insufficient grasp of basic philosophical principles” as the underlying reason for his “negligible theoretical contribution to socialist thought.”¹⁷ Save for a few exceptions,¹⁸ it seems that most historians of German social democracy have tacitly agreed that Bernstein’s political theory does not warrant extensive research efforts. As a result, his central role in German social democracy has received only scant attention, and the exploration of Bernstein’s life and thought as a whole has suffered neglect.

Contrary to this dominant line of argument, my study does not consider the degree of Bernstein’s philosophical sophistication as the key variable in evaluating his significance as a political thinker and politician. Rather, as the main thesis of this work, I argue for Bernstein’s pivotal role in the history of socialist thought on the grounds of his model of “evolutionary socialism” – his pioneering reconceptualization of the relationship between liberal and socialist political theory. I seek to both illuminate and critically evaluate Bernstein’s attempts to change his party’s theoretical self-understanding in order to facilitate a greater degree of cooperation with liberal progressives and thus mobilize German society in the name of democracy. Seen from Bernstein’s perspective, the official acknowledgment and appreciation of existing theoretical and political points of contact between socialists and liberals was the indispensable precondition for the creation of a new, more democratic (and thus more “socialist”) Germany.

In this sense, Bernstein’s attempted synthesis of liberalism and socialism remains relevant for ongoing discussions on the “end of socialism,” for it illuminates the central predicament of socialist theory which continued to haunt the socialist project throughout the twentieth century: its inability consciously to embrace the libertarian legacy of the Enlightenment. As the normative preconditions for any socialist society, Bernstein

¹⁵ Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), p. 176.

¹⁶ See, for example, Leszek Kolakowski, “Bernstein and Revisionism,” in *The Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. II: The Golden Age (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978), p. 111; and Roger Fletcher, “The Life and Work of Eduard Bernstein,” in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *DDS*, p. 298.

¹⁸ For example, Heimann, *Die Voraussetzungen des Demokratischen Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*; and Michael Harrington, *Socialism Past & Future* (New York: Arcade, 1989), p. 276.

emphasized above all the establishment of political democracy. Insurrectionary departures from the evolutionary mode of liberal social change were not only viewed as the dangerous excesses of “romantic utopians,” but represented outright threats to the survival of personal liberty. In fact, Bernstein never failed to emphasize the idea of “democracy” in his party’s self-identification with the label “social democracy,” thereby propounding the notion of an “evolving liberalism” guided by basic rational and humanitarian ideals.

Bernstein encountered such ethically motivated forms of liberalism in the writings of German neo-Kantians like Johann Jacoby, Friedrich Albert Lange, Eugen Dühring, Karl Vorländer, and Conrad Schmidt. Moreover, he showed great sympathy for the British tradition of radical liberalism stretching from Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, and Richard Cobden to late-nineteenth-century Fabians like Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw.¹⁹ Exiled in London for twelve years, Bernstein gradually appropriated England’s rights-based political language, emphasized the primacy of individual self-realization, and praised personal liberty as the paramount ingredient of any democratic social order. Though partially supporting Marx’s radically egalitarian scheme for a rational regulation of economic production, Bernstein regarded socialism as an “heir” to Kant’s and Mill’s political tradition rather than a completely new model fundamentally opposed to liberalism.

Like the “New Liberals” L. T. Hobhouse and J. A. Hobson, who sought to instill a new social-liberal ethos in a young generation of British reformers, Bernstein provided strong arguments for the necessary “modernization” of existing liberal doctrine. Yet as a German social democrat, Bernstein’s task was infinitely more difficult, for he had to address German socialists who had barely escaped Bismarck’s political repression

¹⁹ See, for example, Erika Rikli, *Der Revisionismus: Ein Revisionsversuch der deutschen marxistischen Theorie, 1890–1914* (Zürich: Girsberger Verlag, 1936); Helmut Hirsch, ed. *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, 2nd edn. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976); Pierre Angel, *Eduard Bernstein et L’Evolution du Socialisme Allemand* (Paris: Didier, 1961); DDS; Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie* 4th ed. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976); Erika König, *Vom Revisionismus zum “Demokratischen Sozialismus”* (Berlin: Akademie, 1964); Hans-Jörg Sandkühler and Rafael de la Vega, eds. *Marxismus und Ethik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974); Meyer, *Bernsteins konstruktiver Sozialismus*; Detlef Lehnert, *Reform und Revolution in den Strategiediskussionen der klassischen Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1977); Helga Grebing, *Der Revisionismus: Von Bernstein bis zum “Prager Frühling”* (Munich: Beck, 1977); Bo Gustafsson, *Marxismus und Revisionismus* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972); Helmut Hirsch, *Der “Fabier” Eduard Bernstein* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977); Herbert Frei, *Fabianismus und Bernstein’scher Revisionismus 1884–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979); Roger Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire: Socialist Imperialism in Germany 1897–1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984); and James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

and were thus understandably suspicious of any “socialist” theory that implied some form of cooperation with the unreliable German bourgeoisie. Still, Bernstein insisted that the only path to democracy lay in uniting the ambitions of a politically dissatisfied “new *Mittelstand*” (middle class) of *fin-de-siècle* Germany with the working class’ traditional demands for profound constitutional, administrative, fiscal, and economic reforms. But if it was to happen at all, such a class-transcending alliance could not be achieved without first synchronizing the SPD’s theoretical guidelines with a concrete program of action.

For Bernstein, it was the primary task of the socialist intellectual to complement the necessary “modernization” of liberalism with the long overdue “modernization” of Marxist socialism – a project aimed at anchoring the labor movement in the altered socioeconomic conditions of the new century. Hence, Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism started as a *theoretical* enterprise: the untiring, empirically driven criticism of the “outmoded parts” of Marx’s model.²⁰ According to Bernstein, such criticism would actually facilitate the modernization of liberalism, since Marxism, too, was a fundamentally “evolutionary doctrine.” However, revising Marxist socialism also meant junking its remaining “utopian strains,” throwing out its metaphysical Hegelianism, and eliminating the “unscientific dogmatism” of Marxist popularizers.²¹ In other words, if Marxism was truly the historical science it claimed to be, then its representatives ought to acknowledge that changing empirical conditions necessitated periodic revisions of its theoretical assumptions and predictions.

Ultimately, Bernstein was bound to arrive at conclusions that put him squarely at odds with the founders. He disapproved of the priority of economics over politics; he rejected Marx’s celebrated dissociation of socialism from liberalism; and he parted with Engels’ contempt for “bourgeois” morality. Instead, Bernstein praised the “eternal ideals” of liberalism – the cultivation of refined tastes, the benefits of moral conduct, and the virtues of piecemeal reformism. Thus, long before most of his party comrades, he recognized both the obsolescence of certain Marxist ideas and the inadequacy of Marx’s method. He realized that revolutionary Marxism was a poor vehicle for eliminating the existing democratic deficit between Germany’s semi-feudal nexus of authoritarian social structures, values, and political attitudes and its accelerated process of economic modernization. Indeed, Bernstein was among the first nineteenth-century observers of industrial society who saw both the political importance of the

²⁰ See, for example, Bernstein’s conviction that “the first task of revisionism is theoretical, not practical” (*Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschland, abgehalten zu Dresden 1903*, Berlin, p.397).

²¹ PS, p. 28.

rise of white-collar employees and state officials, and the increasing social differentiation within the proletariat.²² Moreover, he insisted that Marxist doctrine could neither fully explain the remarkable adaptability of liberal capitalism nor make sense of the fact that the leaders of European social democracy were clearly more concerned with the organizational growth of the labor movement and the outcomes of the next elections than with the revolutionary overthrow of the ruling elites. Contrary to the ominous predictions of *The Communist Manifesto*, scores of ordinary workers and most of their representatives seemed to prefer the occasional “crumbs” from the capitalist table to the perils of an all-out class war.

Not hesitating to turn his skepticism on the proletariat itself, Bernstein offered a more empiricist assessment of advanced capitalist society, of the sort we have come to associate with the work of Max Weber. Indeed, Weber’s famous 1918 essay on socialism reiterates many “revisionist” arguments made by Bernstein twenty years earlier.²³ Both Bernstein and Weber emphasized the central importance of politics and parliamentary democracy in adjusting society to the forces of modernity. In their view, such a process was neither a ruptural event in the Marxist sense, nor a return to the organic bonds of the traditional *Gemeinschaft*. Insisting that the utopias of the past could not be salvaged from the process of modernization – not even as the scientistic-romantic idyll of “free associations of free producers” – Bernstein anticipated a future society in which liberal and socialist currents would be forced to coexist for a very long time within the framework of an “organized liberalism.”²⁴

The articulation of this new vision represented no small theoretical feat. Despite his fervent rejection of Hegel’s dialectical method, Bernstein’s quest for evolutionary socialism assumed an almost Hegelian character in its desire simultaneously to “modernize” Marxist socialism and bourgeois liberalism through their mutual *Aufhebung* (“uplifting”) in a new theoretical synthesis. Inherently open-ended, Bernstein’s model was critically shaped by the concrete political problems of more than three decades. In good Aristotelian fashion, he sought to locate the slippery “middle way” of avoiding both an illiberal utopianism that leaves no room for doubt, error, and correction, and the empty pragmatism of cynical careerists whose social reformism had become devoured by cold instrumental concerns. Over and over again, Bernstein struggled to provide a more timely version of the old Marxist search for “some rational

²² Gerhard A. Ritter and Klaus Tenfelde, *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich, 1871 bis 1914* (Berlin: Dietz, 1992), p. 426.

²³ Max Weber, *Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 272–303.

²⁴ PS, p. 150.

criterion for drawing the line between the visionary dreamer at one end and the petty bourgeois at the other.”²⁵ In many instances, however, his theoretical synthesis translated into politically unpopular compromises which failed to satisfy the main socialist and liberal players of conflict-ridden Germany.

Yet, there – in the midst of the concrete political dilemmas of both Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and not limned by the serene poetics of a purely philosophical enterprise – we encounter again the central theme of Bernstein’s quest: “What must social democrats do to make possible, and cautiously extend, democracy in industrially advanced countries?” Applied to the illiberal conditions of his homeland, Bernstein’s *leitmotif* represents an early socialist variant of the vexing “German Question,” so persuasively rendered by Ralf Dahrendorf as “Germany’s persistent failure to give a home to democracy in its liberal sense.”²⁶ By rejecting Bernstein’s theoretical blueprint, nationalist revisionists, orthodox Marxists, and radical revolutionaries missed a great opportunity to make Germany’s political culture more hospitable to liberty and democracy. Ultimately, both socialists and liberals failed to resolve the painful discordance between their classical doctrine and the demands of advanced capitalism. From the Left, Eduard Bernstein offered such a necessary theoretical vision of ideological modernization; this road not taken points to the implication of social democracy in the ensuing twentieth-century tragedy of German politics.

Having set the stage for the ensuing arguments, it might be useful first to offer the reader a short chapter outline of my study. For the sake of maintaining a lively narrative, I decided to divide Bernstein’s life and thought along more or less chronological lines into three main parts.

The initial three chapters of Part 1 furnish the basic features of Bernstein’s life, set against the historical and political background of German liberalism and social democracy. I focus mainly on events that contributed to the formation of Bernstein’s personality and his political outlook – the broad scope of his intellectual interests and his remarkable early party career as an editor and political journalist. Concurring with Austrian social historian Julius Braunthal, who pointed out that Bernstein was “much more of an intellectual than a politician,”²⁷ I contend that Bernstein’s theoretical achievements far outshine his abilities as a party

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁶ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 14. See also Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

²⁷ Julius Braunthal, *History of the International 1864–1914*, trans. Henry Collins and Kenneth Mitchell (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), p. 262.

strategist and political tactician.²⁸ Though an autodidact, Bernstein's personal interactions with the most brilliant minds of European social democracy helped him to develop into a genuine "public intellectual." At the same time, however, by serving as editor-in-chief of the SPD's most influential periodical, he never lost contact with the less illustrious world of the ordinary party member. Hence, the opening chapters offer an interpretation of Bernstein's intellectual achievements which stands in strong opposition to frequently raised arguments belittling his contribution as a political thinker.

In Part 2, I examine in greater detail the main theoretical pillars of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism. Chapter 4 looks at his attempt to modernize Marxist theory by clarifying the meaning of socialism for a new era of advanced capitalism. True to the critical spirit of Kant, he openly disavowed historicist determinism, acknowledging the inability of any political solution to overcome wholly the gulf between necessity and freedom. Discussing his version of historical materialism, I assert that Bernstein realized the impotence of Marxian socialism in the face of problems of liberty and morality which were being continuously confronted on the empirical level. Thus, he cut the dialectical connection between immanence and transcendence which Marx had always presupposed. For Bernstein, Marx's teleology had been completely undermined by the actual course of modern capitalism. While maintaining the importance of structural economic forces for social development, Bernstein's epistemological framework nonetheless resurrects the role of (Kantian) ethical ideals in a *moral* critique of capitalism.

Chapter 5 explores Bernstein's efforts to reconceptualize the connection between state, civil society, and the economy. Rejecting the illiberalism of Marxist doctrine and embracing basic liberal views concerning the nature of society, Bernstein considered the liberal language of "rights" the most appropriate vehicle for expressing socialist demands, thus underscoring the importance of civil society as a public sphere where citizenship ought to be universalized. At the same time, however, he remained opposed to classical liberals who, after the defeat of feudalism, transformed their universalist principles into a defense of privilege against the rising Fourth Estate. In keeping with Kant and Mill, Bernstein defined

²⁸ For a different view on this, see, for example, George Lichtheim, "The Revisionists," in *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, 2nd edn. (New York: Praeger, 1965), pp. 278–300; Kolakowski, *The Main Currents of Marxism*, pp. 98–114; David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 20–41. See also, Christian Gneuss, "The Precursor: Eduard Bernstein," in Leopold Labedz, ed. *Revisionism: Essays in the History of Marxist Ideas* (New York: Praeger, 1962), pp. 31–41; and Susanne Miller and Heinrich Pothoff, *A History of German Social Democracy: From 1848 to the Present* (Lexington/Spa: Berg, 1986), pp. 38–54.

liberty not purely negatively as the absence of coercion, but chose instead to emphasize the substantive nature of freedom: political demands for universal suffrage, equality of opportunity, and a more equitable distribution of the social product. By shifting his focus from an analysis of inequalities on the level of production to the level of distribution, Bernstein again betrayed his liberal bias in favor of pursuing social justice through redistributive measures, thus endowing the state with the crucial task of initiating and supervising piecemeal reforms.

Once the essential features of his ethical-liberal interpretation of Marxist socialism have become apparent, Part 3 explores the main political problems Bernstein encountered on his quest for evolutionary socialism. Searching for the origins of the practical defeat of his vision, chapter 6 first identifies the main arguments advanced by Bernstein's liberal and socialist opponents. Orthodox Marxist critics like Kautsky and radicals like Luxemburg charged with good reason that Bernstein had actually broken with the founders' economic-materialist conception of history. Bernstein was, in fact, fooling himself by thinking that the essence of Marx's theory could be preserved in spite of his revisionist "amendments." Without the Marxist idea that capitalism's inner laws of development would, with natural necessity, eventually lead to a general "break-down" of society and open a new chapter in human history, socialism lost the powerful combination of "scientific" analysis and romantic prophecy that had made it so attractive to millions of followers.

On the other hand, the response from Bernstein's liberal critics indicated that the German bourgeoisie was far more national-liberal than ethical-liberal. His principled reformism often struck them as too moralistic in tone and too idealistic in design – a disarmingly decent, but infeasible and perhaps even dangerous enterprise in a Germany supposedly surrounded by expansionist enemies. Liberals were also quick to add a good dose of their "realism" to the vital question of political leadership. Who would effectively represent and market an "evolutionary" brand of socialism in Germany? Aside from lacking personal "charisma," Bernstein possessed only moderate public-speaking abilities. Moreover, his stubborn insistence on ethical principles would burden the crucial tasks of political bargaining. As a mediator between opposing factions, Bernstein was simply not in the same league with, say, Friedrich Ebert, Friedrich Naumann, or Gustav Stresemann. In fact, when Bernstein rejected forthcoming offers from left-liberals to leave the SPD and join them, and, in addition, disappointed the hopes of the nationalistic Party *Praktiker* to spearhead a nationalist faction, his liberal brand of socialism was sentenced to an assured political death.

As opposed to most accounts that put the end of the SPD's "Revisionist

Controversy” at around 1903, I argue in chapters 7 and 8 that the old dispute heated up once again between 1905 and 1914, during the great theoretical debates on the use of the political mass strike and the role of nationalism. Set within a general assessment of the cultural assumptions underlying his views on patriotism and colonialism, I present the numerous political obstacles Bernstein encountered as he struggled to maintain his Aristotelian “middle way” between political realism and ethical idealism, particularly in his attempt to furnish alternatives to German nationalism and imperialism. Moreover, I discuss the intimate link between the political fate of Bernstein’s intellectual quest and the accelerated process of bureaucratization in German social democracy. Bernstein’s activities during the Great War and the German Revolution, as well as his pivotal role in drafting the new Görlitz Party Program, round out the themes of this chapter. Ultimately, along with Carl Schorske, I argue that the revolutionary events of 1918 and 1919 merely formalized the factional divisions that were already present within the pre-war international labor movement.²⁹

With the arrival of a new Weimar republican order, it appeared as though Bernstein’s quest for evolutionary socialism was to be given a new lease on life, but the sputtering German economy and an increasingly technocratic SPD contributed to the remarkable success of radicalisms of both the Right and the Left. Chapter 9 traces the tensions between Bernstein’s ethical ideals and the various strands of socialist instrumentalism exemplified in the rise of Bolshevism and the widely discussed issue of German war guilt. In the end, his theoretical vision was smothered between a state socialism based on industrial productivity and the rise of extremist political parties. While Bernstein established the *theoretical* desirability for a liberal socialism, he could not guarantee that actual political *practice* would honor his ethical ideals. In other words, without the Marxist dogma of history itself assuring the coming of the classless society, socialism once again became an uncertain enterprise, merely striving to approximate a moral order that must forever elude the full grasp of positivity.

In light of this, Bernstein’s attempt to merge the two great progressive traditions ran a high risk of strengthening a utilitarian conception of politics as the arena for political bargaining and compromises whose outcomes would be judged in strictly instrumental terms. The fulfillment of an ethical duty in the application of socialist principles thus became a weak counterforce to the satisfaction of infinite material needs. Accepting the political rules of representative democracy, Bernstein had a poor eye for the tendency of reformism to breed technocrats who, following

²⁹ Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1955).

omnipresent electoral imperatives, let their political activities be guided chiefly by their own self-interest and the immediate material concerns of their constituencies.³⁰

Hence, it has been suggested that Bernstein's evolutionary socialism represents a "dilemma of principles and power" emerging from the clash of reform and revolution – two different strategies of advancing social change.³¹ While it is true that this predicament pertains to *all* political theories intent on changing a given political order, a formulation of "dilemmas" in such general terms pays insufficient attention to Bernstein's specific "revisionist" concerns. As the first prominent Marxist theorist of reform, Bernstein assumed that the increasing complexity of modern society made the large-scale revolutions of the old days obsolete. Thus, the main question addressed by his evolutionary socialism was *not* the old Platonic dilemma of whether reformers will ever gain the political power they must have to put their theories into practice;³² rather, he sought to motivate social reformists not to jettison ethical principles on their assured way to political power.

Given the nature of the regime that overthrew the Weimar Republic, must we conclude that Bernstein's quest ended in total failure? At first glance, there seems to be sufficient evidence to confirm such a view. Indeed, seen from a realist perspective, one might conclude that Bernstein's vision failed to overcome the fatal combination of Germany's illiberal sociopolitical order, its widespread nationalist resentment, and its policy of foreign aggression.³³ Moreover, his theoretical synthesis not only failed to save the integrity of Marxism, but, conversely, provided the basis for the politically and ideologically devastating struggles of the Left over the "correct" meaning of "Marxism" and "socialism."

However, looking at the astonishing rebirth of European social democracy following the end of World War II, one can also find some compelling arguments to the contrary. In the epilogue of this study, however, I go beyond merely recounting the "golden years of democratic socialism" of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, I make the far more difficult case for the contemporary relevance of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism. First, of course, there is his admonition to retain the crucial process of critical self-reflection as the indispensable catalyst that drives the evolution of *any* democratic socialism. Second, Bernstein's appreciation of liberalism contests the deeply engrained equation of "socialism" with "Marxism" based on the alleged antithesis in principle between liberalism and socialism. At the supposed "end of socialism," Bernstein's embryonic

³⁰ For an excellent analysis of this "electoral dilemma," see Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

³¹ This is the thesis of *DDS*, pp. 7–8; 298–310.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 302. ³³ Roger Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, pp. 184–185.

model of a “liberal socialism” represents the logical point of departure for the sole viable progressive project remaining in our post-Soviet and (perhaps) post-Keynesian era: a new focus on the role of civil society and a conception of democracy that favors the extension of personal rights over property rights.³⁴

It is for this reason that I decline to evaluate Bernstein’s political thought solely by applying philosophical standards. What makes his intellectual quest a worthwhile subject of academic inquiry is neither its degree of philosophical sophistication nor its lack of methodological purity. Rather, it is Bernstein’s highly original attempt to formulate a coherent synthesis of two great political traditions that stand for individual self-realization and distributive justice. In a time when old assumptions about the meaning of socialism no longer hold and liberal notions of universalism fall under attack from a multitude of new intellectual forces, a fundamental reconsideration of the theoretical and historical ties between these two time-honored traditions serves an important purpose. Herein lies what is today worth re-examining in Bernstein’s political thought.

A final word on the guiding metaphor of the book: in an attempt to capture the peculiar spirit of Bernstein’s political enterprise, I struck upon the term “quest,” for it suggests not only a thorough investigation of the subject matter at hand, but also connotes an almost romantic, adventurous journey with no fixed destination, yet guided by a noble vision.³⁵ It is no coincidence that Bernstein’s most famous statement should be his much misinterpreted comment that a static “final goal” of socialism, no matter how perfect, had no meaning to him; while the concrete social struggle of the labor movement meant “everything.” His willingness to sacrifice the Marxist dogmas of a future *telos* for the open-ended quality of an uncertain present reappears in his love for the political essay as a stylistic vehicle of inherently unfinished quality and the logical device for fostering the crucial exercise of critical reflectivity.

Hence, one should not expect to find the “essence” of Bernstein’s life work in a single book or a series of volumes. Rather, one must duplicate Bernstein’s intricate quest leading through a diffuse collection of writings that span more than three decades. They are comprised of a dozen books and literally hundreds of book reviews, published lectures, essays, and monographs that, to this day, defy systematic arrangement. Ranging from highly theoretical discussions of Marx’s labor theory of value to journalistic observations regarding political events of the day, the *leitmotive* of Bernstein’s intellectual quest only reveal themselves when situated within the details of his personal life and the history of German social democracy.

³⁴ See Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

³⁵ I am greatly indebted to Stephen Eric Bronner for this formulation.

Part 1

Preparation

1 The making of a social democrat

Prologue

At first glance, an assessment of Eduard Bernstein's life and thought seems to be a fairly straightforward project. Hannah Arendt has put the matter succinctly: "Bernstein was honest, analyzed what he saw, was loyal to reality and critical of Marx."¹ Sir Isaiah Berlin concurs: "Eduard Bernstein pointed out more clearly than any one before him the apparent non-fulfillment of various Marxist prophesies."² Yet, two entirely different images of the "Father of Revisionism" emerge from the descriptions of his contemporaries. The first, characterized by the relentless criticism of his political and ideological opponents, presents a weak, theoretically confused man who repaid the kindness of his mentor, Friedrich Engels, by attempting to destroy the "communist world outlook" of "scientific socialism" and betraying the cause of the proletariat.³ The second account, conjured up by those sympathetic to Bernstein's revisionist cause, is one of exaggerated praise, depicting a political thinker ahead of his time who, dedicated to improving the lot of the working classes, fearlessly attacked an antiquated theory which proved to be out of step with auspicious sociopolitical developments.⁴

Not only do both images fail to do justice to the actual person, but they also fall woefully short of accurately presenting Bernstein's long and prolific career as a socialist theorist, political journalist, national

¹ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," in J. P. Nertl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Schocken, 1989), p. xxvii.

² Isaiah Berlin cited on the cover of Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*.

³ See, for example, Luxemburg, *Reform and Revolution?*; Lenin, *What is To Be Done?*; Karl Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm: Eine Antikritik* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976); and Georg Lukacs, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). Unless noted otherwise, all translations from original German sources are by the author.

⁴ See, for example, Paul Kampffmeyer, *Eduard Bernstein und der Sozialistische Aufbau* (Berlin: Dietz, 1930); and Waldemar von Grumbkov, "Sozialismus und Pazifismus," in *Mitarbeiter des Breslauer "Volkswacht," Grundsätzliches zum Tageskampf: Festgabe für Eduard Bernstein* (Breslau: Volkswacht, 1925).

politician, political economist, and historian of the labor movement. Like all controversial figures in political history, Bernstein's name has elicited powerful emotional responses; among the socialist leaders of the early twentieth century, we rarely find representatives in any country who did not form a strong opinion about "Ede" Bernstein. Though they clashed over the value of Bernstein's intellectual production, a close reading of the less polemical accounts of his contemporary critics reveals unanimity regarding two qualities of Bernstein's character: his personal integrity and his wide-ranging intellectual interests.

His closest political friend and vehement theoretical opponent, Karl Kautsky, captured the essence of Bernstein's personality when he wrote in 1920: "I admire both Bernstein's honesty and straightforwardness, which always spurned mere posing and demagoguery, and his great sense of justice."⁵ Even at the height of the Revisionist Controversy, when he fundamentally disagreed with Bernstein, the legendary German party leader, August Bebel, attested to "Bernstein's zeal for truth and considerable astuteness."⁶ Victor Adler, the founder of Austrian social democracy, went even further:

Forcibly removed from practical party work, a sharp theoretical mind with encyclopaedic knowledge, a fanatic for justice, and a skeptic of that most refined breed which turns its skepticism upon itself and has an insatiable desire for self-criticism, Bernstein has not only produced a series of excellent theoretical and historical works but has also assumed one of the most important party functions, that of criticizing its principles and tactics.⁷

Paul Löbe, the first social democratic Reichstag president, also acknowledged the breadth of Bernstein's intellect when he noted that, "within the limited framework of an essay, it is impossible to address all the policy fields that Bernstein covered in the course of his long parliamentary career."⁸ The prominent Kant biographer, Karl Vorländer, though critical of Bernstein's epistemology and philosophy of science, still admitted that it was "Bernstein's non-dogmatic intellectual engagement that made possible a renewed discussion about the philosophical foundations of socialism even beyond the borders of Germany."⁹ Finally, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber openly acknowledged his intellectual debt to Bernstein by drawing on arguments from his 1895 book, *History of Socialism*, which definitively linked the secular

⁵ Karl Kautsky, "Eduard Bernstein," in *Die Weltbühne* 16.2 (1920), p. 44.

⁶ Bebel to Bernstein (October 16, 1898) in *MS*, p. 320.

⁷ Victor Adler, "The Party Conference at Stuttgart," in *ibid.*, p. 313.

⁸ Paul Löbe, "Eduard Bernstein als Breslauer Abgeordneter," in Helmut Hirsch, *Der "Fabier" Eduard Bernstein* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977), p. 153.

⁹ Karl Vorländer, *Kant und Marx: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie des Sozialismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926), p. 185.

asceticism of Protestantism and the accumulation process of capital: “[Bernstein’s] discussion is the first which has suggested these important relationships.”¹⁰

Most promising German intellectuals born in the middle of the nineteenth century were assisted in their theoretical development by privileged family backgrounds, the church, or the support of wealthy mentors. This rule does not hold in Bernstein’s case. Raising their son in relative poverty, his parents lacked both the social connections and the funds to send him to college. It was only because of the professional opportunities represented in the rising nineteenth-century European labor movement that Bernstein was afforded the chance to develop his intellectual capacities.

Family origins and childhood

Born in Berlin on January 6, 1850, the seventh child of the Jewish railroad engine-driver Jakob Bernstein and his wife Johanna, Eduard Bernstein grew up in quite modest circumstances.¹¹ At the time of the boy’s birth, Berlin was very much a provincial capital, surrounded by a protective wall that had been erected in the eighteenth century by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I in order to prevent mass desertion by his soldiers.

Jakob Bernstein’s family was of Polish origin, and, like that of Karl Marx, consisted of a long line of rabbis and talmudic scholars. Yet for the previous two generations, the descendants of the Bernstein family had turned away from Jewish scholarship and embraced secularism in the form of trade, artisanship, and public service. The only intellectual in the Bernstein family at the time of Eduard’s birth was Jakob Bernstein’s older brother Aaron, who, according to orthodox Jewish tradition, was sent to the rabbinical school at Fordon in West Prussia. However, after finishing the required three years of rabbinical study, Aaron refused to take his final examinations, and expressed his intention to embark on a more secular journalistic career. Aaron Bernstein ultimately founded the widely read newspaper, *Berliner Volkszeitung*, and earned a considerable reputation as a liberal journalist.

Moreover, Aaron emerged as an astute historian of the 1848 revolution, in which he participated on the side of the losing liberal forces. A personal friend of Alexander von Humboldt, he achieved considerable fame as the

¹⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin Hyman, 1930), p. 278.

¹¹ Bernstein’s autobiographical material is contained in his books, *Von 1850 bis 1872: Kindheit und Jugendjahre* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1926); *Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre* (Berlin: Bücherkreis, 1928); *My Years of Exile: Reminiscences of a Socialist*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1921); and *ES*.

author of *General Natural Science Books*, a series of science textbooks written for a lay readership. Reprinted many times, these books captured a wide audience, including the young Albert Einstein, who later remarked that he read them “with breathless exhilaration.”¹² The lucid style of Aaron’s work drew praise from many in the German scientific community, ultimately earning him a honorary doctorate from the University of Tübingen. Though close to left-liberal thinkers like Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, Aaron Bernstein remained largely indifferent to the political cause of the labor movement.

The weakness of German liberalism has its roots in Germany’s *Sonderweg* toward modernity – its idiosyncratic social development, its rapid industrialization while neglecting to destroy the pre-modern political conditions underlying its social authoritarianism.¹³ Undoubtedly, there existed some similarities between British and German nineteenth-century forms of liberalism,¹⁴ but the latter’s political agenda was almost entirely consumed by the problems arising from the ongoing process of nation-building. Unlike their British counterparts, German liberals like Aaron Bernstein tended to neglect workers’ issues, thus allowing the rising labor movement to build its political self-understanding around the “social question.” Hence, when Eduard later publicly called his uncle a “German petty bourgeois, ignorant of political economy,” Aaron’s initial interest in his nephew’s political career quickly waned.¹⁵ Yet, over time, Eduard’s personality and even his political outlook began to resemble his uncle’s, for both men displayed “uncompromising honesty and courage, an intense ethical commitment, and a

¹² Einstein cited in Julius Schöps, *Bürgerliche Aufklärung und liberales Freiheitsdenken: A. Bernstein in seiner Zeit* (Stuttgart: Burg, 1992), p. 247.

¹³ See, for example, Leonhard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom* (Boston: Beacon, 1957); Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*; Lothar Gall, *Geschichte des deutschen Liberalismus* (Köln: Kohlhammer, 1966); Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966); Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism*; James Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978); Heinrich August Winkler, *Liberalismus und Antiliberalismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979); David Blackbourn and Geoff Ely, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984); Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988); David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, eds. *The German Bourgeoisie* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁴ For conflicting views in the ongoing debate over the compatibility of German and British forms of liberalism, see, for example, Geoff Eley, “Liberalism, Europe, and the Bourgeoisie 1860–1914,” in *ibid.*, pp. 293–317; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Britain and Germany 1800–1914. Two Developmental Paths towards Industrial Society* (London, 1986); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992); and John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Essays in Comparative History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992).

¹⁵ Schöps, *Bürgerliche Aufklärung und liberales Freiheitsdenken: A. Bernstein in seiner Zeit*, pp. 277–278.

clear distaste for dogmatic doctrine and extreme forms of political radicalism.”¹⁶

The so-called “Jewish Residence Laws” requiring Jews who had not been born in Berlin to depart the city after a year of residence, were still in force in 1838, the year Jakob Bernstein settled in Berlin. Each year, Eduard’s father was officially obliged to “leave” the city of Berlin through one city gate, only to return hours later through another one and present himself to a different Prussian “gate official” who was unaware of his recent “departure.” At the time Eduard was born, the situation had only slightly improved. Although Article 12 of the revised 1850 Prussian Constitution established freedom of religion, a later article of the same document established Christianity as the basis for “those institutions of the state which deal with the practice of religion.” In other words, Jews were robbed of their religious equality by the very same document that supposedly guaranteed it.¹⁷ Indeed, anti-Semitism was widespread in Prussia, and Jews were barred from holding state office or pursuing higher ranks in the military.

Like many German Jews at the time, Jakob Bernstein was not observant. He and his family rapidly assimilated, considering themselves “Prussian–German patriots,” refusing to speak Yiddish, and celebrating Christian holidays like Christmas alongside the traditional Jewish High Holidays. Rarely attending even the Reform Jewish synagogue, Jakob extended to his children the rare privilege of choosing their own degree of religious involvement.

In 1843, Jakob Bernstein joined Prussia’s newly founded Berlin–Anhalt Railroad Company, and soon distinguished himself as an employee with an extraordinary sense of professional responsibility. In thirty years of service as an engine driver, he never called in sick or missed even one day of work! Though Jakob excelled at his job, he was nonetheless inept at handling the family finances, which forced his wife Johanna to stretch the food reserves in order to get by. This meant that meat dishes were a rarity in the Bernstein household. When meat did appear on the table, most of it went to Jakob, the family “provider,” to sustain him in his physically demanding labors. Most meals consisted of *Eintopf*, a thick stew made of bread, potatoes, and green vegetables.

Both Jakob and Johanna were gentle parents with liberal views who – unheard of in mid-nineteenth-century Prussia – only very rarely physically disciplined their children. Little “Ede” learned early on that indulging in coarse language was unacceptable to his parents. Unlike her husband, Johanna Bernstein, née Rosenberg, was a fragile woman who, weakened

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278. ¹⁷ *EB*, p. 9.

by frequent childbirth, further sacrificed her physical health to demanding housework and the exhausting care of her ten surviving children. Moreover, she was solely responsible for running the Bernstein household affairs, which, given the family size, turned out to be more than a full-time job. Calculating expenses, chopping wood, and keeping the fire going in the stove alone were extremely demanding tasks for a woman who was often too weak to climb the stairs at the end of the day.

Born in 1820, Johanna had lost her parents while still a child and gone to live with relatives in Magdeburg, Saxony. Her aunt, a callous, mean-spirited woman, saw in the girl a welcome object for exploitation and frequently forced her to do housework to the point of physical collapse. As soon as Johanna was old enough to find work on her own, she left the Magdeburg household for good. Not long after her departure, she met and fell in love with Jakob Bernstein. Like her husband, Johanna showed some interest in politics, and took a strong liberal position during the 1848 revolution. Indeed, it was she who kept a prized picture of her revolutionary hero, Johann Jacoby, a liberal democrat who was later to become a socialist and one of Eduard's great idols. Showing the lithograph to her son, Johanna impressed upon the boy that Jacoby was "a great man and a champion of the people."¹⁸

Yet, by the 1850s, the high political hopes of radical democrats like Johann Jacobi had all but vanished. The main political objective of a German revolution – the creation of a liberal constitution for a unified German nation state – foundered in 1849 on the refusal of the Prussian king to accept the crown of a constitutional German Empire that drastically limited his powers. Unwilling to call for open resistance, the delegates of the 1849 Frankfurt National Assembly returned home empty-handed. Germany remained divided, and its aristocratic authoritarianism regained most of its former status in the ensuing decade of reaction. In Prussia, where the conservative reaction was most successful, liberalism was severely curtailed in the new 1850 Constitution. Espousing "monarchical constitutionalism," the document permitted the hegemony of the Crown independent of the consent of the people. In fact, the patrimonial Prussian *Staatsidea* ("idea of the state") personified in the monarch, precluded the legitimation of a politically constituted civil society removed from the will of the king, making Prussian citizens once again powerless subjects of an authoritarian military state.

Jacoby's liberal demands for universal suffrage were only partly fulfilled in the unequal Prussian "Three-Class Suffrage" system, based solely on the criterion of taxable wealth. In addition, government ministers were

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

entirely responsible to the king, who appointed them without consulting the Diet; the parliament's right to veto the budget rested on shaky constitutional grounds; and the 1854 creation of an aristocratic Upper House further weakened the powers of elected representatives. With liberal democrats boycotting the "sham elections" of the late 1850s, conservative political forces once again succeeded in dominating the political scene.

Disillusioned with politics and aging fast under the blows of her hard life, Johanna Bernstein would succumb to tuberculosis at age forty-eight. Like his mother, Eduard was a sickly child who, though intellectually gifted, never received appropriate educational guidance from his parents. Stunted in his physical growth, Eduard was referred to by neighbors and family friends as "the small and weak boy." Doctors gave him only a few years to live, even going so far as to refuse prescribing proper medication; for, as they saw it, such expenses would be "nothing but waste." When Johanna Bernstein asked one of them whether there might be some special treatment that did not require medication and could still prolong her son's life, the doctor replied: "Well, perhaps nature itself might help in the end but, most of all, I'd recommend a sip of good Bavarian beer."¹⁹ Obviously, the doctor's advice must have been excellent, for "the small and weak boy" ultimately reached the blessed age of eighty-two.

School years

Young Ede's school years seem to have been like those of most gifted, but financially disadvantaged children. Tutored by his older brother Max, Eduard was already able to read and write by the time he entered the first grade. His pleasant character, honesty, and intellectual gifts soon caught the attention of his teachers, who pressured Jakob Bernstein to provide his son with an education beyond elementary school. One of Ede's teachers, an ardent anti-Semitic Christian conservative, even attempted to persuade "*das brave Kind*" (the well-behaved child) to convert to Christianity. Never considering religious matters a burning issue, the young Bernstein refused the honor. As a teenager, Eduard came to doubt all religious dogma, and he was particularly skeptical about the existence of a personal god. When his mother died in 1868, his atheism became a life-long conviction. Tormented by the idea that, since there was no ultimate "beyond," he would never see his mother again, the young Bernstein finally resolved his mental anguish in the belief that his mother would still live on in his memory.

Young Ede soon received a further taste of the power of religious

¹⁹ Bernstein, *Von 1850-1872*, p. 29.

prejudice in the form of the common Prussian contempt for Judaism. When his non-Jewish classmates found themselves intellectually surpassed by the gifted Eduard, they did not hesitate to vent their anger by taunting him with cries of “Jew!” and “Dirty Jew!” Deeply distressed, Ede sought after-school refuge in the arms of his father, who told the boy that such insults were characteristic of the low intellectual abilities of his friends, and advised him not take them seriously. In the long run, however, there was no way for Eduard to escape his origins. Even words of praise, like those of a well-meaning neighbor, served as forceful reminders of his despised ethnic identity: “You Bernsteins aren’t like ‘real’ Jews.”²⁰ Like most German Jews, the young Ede soon learned to put up with, and accommodate to, a largely anti-Semitic society.

Eduard’s continued academic success prompted his parents to make great financial sacrifices in order to send him to *Gymnasium*, the highest-level secondary school in Germany preparing students for university study. In the course of his intellectual development, the boy soon discovered that he had a penchant for pragmatic problem-solving and analytical thinking, excelling particularly in mathematics, science, and languages. In accord with his analytical gifts, Eduard also became a master of chess, which he loved to play both with his peers and even with interested adults. At the age of fourteen, he developed a great fondness for theater, dance, and poetry almost overnight, and, much to the astonishment of his uneducated working-class neighbors, took to reciting publicly the long ballads of his beloved German poets, Schiller and Goethe. Bernstein’s love for Schiller would later strengthen his friendship with Friedrich Engels, the one-time president of the “Schiller Association” in Manchester, England. Drawn to the circus and amusement parks, Ede spent long hours admiring intricate historical panoramas of great battles through a spectroscope.

When funds for his son’s education were finally exhausted, Jakob Bernstein pleaded with the sixteen-year-old Eduard to leave *Gymnasium* and pursue a lucrative trade. His dreams of becoming an eloquent poet shattered, the good-natured boy obliged his father by entering the bank of the brothers Guttentag in Berlin as an apprentice-clerk. Here, in a rather lighthearted fashion, Bernstein grasped the intricacies of the bank and insurance business. His considerable salary not only permitted him to maintain himself, but also went a long way in helping to support his family.

But the novelty of learning the banking profession would soon be dwarfed by far greater attractions. Having for a long time resisted the influence of the numerous prostitutes crowding the night-time streets of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Berlin's red-light district, the prudish young Bernstein finally succumbed to his curiosity. After his initial hesitancy, he came to enjoy his regular visits. In this he was not unlike other young Prussian men whose "sexual education" in the bordellos was regarded as a necessary preparation for marriage.

The socialist

Rising nationalist sentiments in the wake of the 1859 Austro-Italian War, and the accession to the throne of the less autocratic Prince Wilhelm, facilitated an impressive resurgence of liberalism and its nationalist vision in state and local elections. The newly founded "National Association" (*Nationalverein*) reunited liberals and democrats along a broad consensus program chiefly aimed at German unification. A few years later, Prussia's successful 1866 war against the Austrian Empire again fanned nationalistic flames and enhanced popular support for a *kleindeutsche* German unification under Prussian leadership.

No doubt, nationalism formed the sociopolitical context of Bernstein's first political impressions. Already as a boy, Eduard had shown a mild interest in war, but the 1866 military endeavor awakened in him the first stirrings of a powerful patriotic sentiment. Hence, it is not surprising that in 1870, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Bernstein was immediately swept away by the public expression of anti-French feeling pervading the Berlin streets. His Prussian chauvinism, however, quickly gave way to more characteristic promptings of objective analysis and tolerance, and he was soon arguing that his country's propaganda be directed against the authoritarian governments of both Emperor Napoleon III and the Prussian king, not the "ordinary French people." For publicly announcing his unpopular views, Bernstein was ejected from a raucous Berlin tavern by a patriotic bouncer. But the encounter only strengthened his disgust for extreme forms of nationalism in general, and for the uncompromising militarism of Bismarck's government in particular. Once having grasped the dimensions of human suffering imposed by war, Bernstein gradually moved toward a more detached and internationalist stance, no longer heeding the nationalistic articles of the German press, and barely noticing the events surrounding the short-lived socialist experiment of the 1871 Paris Commune.

At the same time, however, he developed an interest in Prussian politics, following the shifting fortunes of the liberal forces in particular. In the early 1860s, the Prussian Lower House, dominated by the German Progress Party (*Deutsche Fortschrittspartei*), had been strong enough to challenge the most blatant authoritarian features of monarchical constitu-

tionalism. For a while it seemed that history had afforded the revolutionary forces of 1848 a second chance; King Wilhelm I was even ready to abdicate. But instead of sweeping constitutional reforms came the “Blood and Iron” tactics of the new Prussian Minister President, Prince Otto von Bismarck.

Though insisting on the right of parliament to detail the hotly disputed military budget, the Progress Party encountered in Bismarck a vigorous opponent who did not hesitate to take considerable political risks by suspending most constitutional rights and dissolving parliament for lengthy periods.²¹ During the next four years, the Prussian Minister President’s repressive domestic tactics aimed at retaining undisputed control for the Christian–monarchical–aristocratic order with its conservative ideal of an authoritarian *Ständestaat* (“corporate state”). At the same time, Bismarck used the new mood of militaristic expansionism to appeal for support from both anti-aristocratic industrialists and nationalistic liberals. Eventually, his extremely popular campaign against Denmark intimidated the majority of liberal deputies into accepting the 1866 Indemnity Bill, which formally ended the constitutional conflict in Bismarck’s favor.

This divisive vote marked the decline of German liberalism: in 1867, it split into a progressive minority party and the right-wing “national-liberal Party,” which, in order to remain politically viable, was forced to continue its cooperation with Bismarck during the next decade. The fact that the national-liberals remained Germany’s dominant “liberal” party until 1918 speaks for the pervasiveness of a conservative *Weltanschauung*.²² Further secessionist movements split the liberals in 1880, 1884, and 1893, amplifying the political divisions then plaguing the liberal camp. Its numerous factions remained hopelessly at odds with each other on issues of constitutional reform, nationalism, and, most of all, on how to deal with the rising working class.

Ever more identified with democratic liberalism, Bernstein founded a small discussion circle of like-minded friends, naming it “Utopia” after Thomas More’s ideal utopian society. The creation of “Utopia” coincided with Bismarck’s 1871 establishment of the German Empire under Prussian hegemony. Though formally a “constitutional monarchy,” the Reich’s Prussian legal foundations gave the Imperial Government, appointed by the Kaiser, far greater powers than the elected Reichstag. The key positions in the Empire’s vast state bureaucracy and the powerful

²¹ See Günther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany* (Totowa, NJ: The Bedminster Press, 1963), pp. 21–22.

²² See James F. Harris, *A Study in the Theory and Practice of German Liberalism: Eduard Lasker, 1829–1884* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

imperial army tended to be occupied by aristocratic Junkers and conservative civil servants who stalwartly defend their privileges against liberal pressures for reform. Maintaining the discriminatory electoral system in Prussia, Bismarck used his first years as Imperial chancellor to spearhead the founding of a “new” German Conservative Party based on the alliance of agriculture and industry – the famous marriage of “Iron and Rye.” This renewed turn to conservatism, known as “*konservative Sammlungspolitik*,” solidified the reactionary mood of “illiberalism” which dominated the Wilhelmine Empire and, according to Max Weber, permitted “an economically sinking class” to retain its power and authority.²³

Bernstein’s left-leaning association soon explored the political possibilities for fighting this powerful combination of surviving feudal elements, civil servants, and a nationalist-conservative upper bourgeoisie. Ede’s interest in the industrial proletariat as an agent of social change was kindled during a “Utopia” lecture on socialism given by Friedrich Fritzsche, a seasoned political agitator and social democrat. Fritzsche spoke eloquently on the “social question,” conveying to his young listeners the sentiments of a battle-tested worker who had been bitterly disappointed by the inaction of German liberal parties, particularly on the important issue of “workers’ rights.”

Already the 1848/49 constitutional debates over the social component of the “catalogue of basic civil rights” (*Grundrechte*) had foreshadowed the main ideological faultlines that would separate liberal forces for decades to come. At the center of the dispute was the question of whether the Bill of Rights should be extended to deal with the most visible social ills of a rapidly industrializing society. In the years following, liberal attitudes toward the social question began to crystallize around three distinct positions. Center-right “classical” Manchester liberals argued for strict adherence to *laissez-faire* economic policies, thus strongly denying the state a major role in addressing existing social inequalities. The center-left faction envisaged significant state regulations and moderate protectionist policies for the sake of maintaining social and economic harmony. Finally, the small left-liberal group of republicans and democrats not only approved of state interference with the economy, but also demanded universal, equal suffrage as the critical instrument in solving the social question in a democratically constituted Germany of the future.²⁴

In the 1860s, the social question expanded into the “workers” question,” with liberal intellectuals passionately debating the proper political role of the proletariat. While the organizational distinctions between

²³ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Munich: Drei Mosken Verlag, 1921), p. 24. On the topic of German “illiberalism,” see Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism*.

²⁴ See Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, p. 63.

liberal and working-class associations were often blurred, many liberal intellectuals warned against a “proletarianization” of their movement.²⁵ Mostly restricting themselves to endorsing the formation of “liberal interest coalitions” to bridge their internal differences, they maintained a largely hostile posture toward the working class. Liberal political organizations like the *Nationalverein* refused membership to workers’ associations, claiming that “workers should first think about raising their economic status before demanding political rights.”²⁶ Indeed, they were reluctant to accede to the Fourth Estate’s principal demand – the abolition of unequal suffrage.²⁷

Refusing to integrate working-class concerns into his liberal agenda, the influential national liberal Johannes von Miquel appealed instead to a class-transcending humanism, lecturing the proletariat on its duty to live up to the social expectations of a “generous fatherland” which had bestowed upon it the privilege of “allowing” it to vote at all.²⁸ Even more progressive liberal intellectuals like Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch and Julius Vahlteich, who dedicated their energy to founding and supporting workers’ self-help and educational organizations, remained skeptical of the desirability of political coalitions between liberals and workers, thus driving sensitive and intelligent young “protoliberals” with a working-class background like Bernstein into the hands of proletarian agitators.

As a result of Fritzsche’s talk, Bernstein resolved to keep a close watch on workers’ organizations. The government’s well-publicized 1872 “Leipzig High Treason Trials” against Wilhelm Liebknecht,²⁹ August Bebel,³⁰ and other leading members of the so-called “Eisenacher” faction of German social democracy afforded Bernstein a fine opportunity to observe working-class politics in action. At the time of the trial, Bebel’s small socialist party was a fast-growing organization with its own party organ, called *Der Volksstaat*.

Bebel and his comrades were charged with the “crimes” of publicly

²⁵ Jürgen Kocka, “Problems of Working-Class Formation in Germany,” in Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds. *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), pp. 333–336.

²⁶ Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch cited in Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, p. 115.

²⁷ Gregory M. Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 116.

²⁸ Miquel cited in Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, p. 118.

²⁹ For biographical material on Liebknecht, see Raymond H. Dominick III, *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the Founding of the German Social Democratic Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

³⁰ For literature on and by Bebel, see, for example, August Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1953); Helmut Hirsch, *August Bebel. Sein Leben in Dokumenten, Reden und Schriften* (Köln-Berlin: Dietz, 1968); W. H. Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1980); and Francis L. Carsten, *August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1991).

supporting a quick end to the Franco-Prussian War and daring to vote against the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. As the trial unfolded, Bernstein's natural sense of justice was evoked by Bebel's and Liebknecht's breathtaking defense speeches – true masterpieces of romantic rhetoric – which almost invariably ended with their professed “readiness to die for the noble goals of social democracy.”³¹ The defendants' ethical convictions and internationalist stance so kindled Bernstein's interest in socialism that it took him only a short time to acquaint himself with the main writings of the great working-class thinkers, Ferdinand Lassalle, Eugen Dühring, and Karl Marx.

August Bebel was released from his brief prison term a few months after the trial. Eager to meet the young, charismatic party leader in person, Bernstein decided to attend a lecture on socialism which Bebel was presenting to the North-Berlin Workers' Association. Once again, the combination of Bebel's extraordinary abilities as a public speaker and his modest working-class appearance proved immensely appealing to the budding radical. Openly criticizing Bismarck's conservative “oppressor state,” Bebel fearlessly reinforced his reputation among the Junkers who had dubbed him “the shameless loud-mouth” (*der unverschämte Schreier*).³² Yet, Bebel also turned his wrath against liberals who had suggested that the best way to improve the lot of the industrial proletariat was both to increase the national budget's social expenditures and to challenge wealthy philanthropists to ease their social conscience by means of charitable donations.³³ In fact, Bebel was referring to those more enlightened liberals who realized that the process of industrialization, which had unfolded in Germany with such extraordinary speed, was continuing to sharpen class divisions and might provoke a social revolution which would prevent their desired course of gradual political liberalization.

In 1872, such socially conscious liberal academics under the leadership of the renowned economist Gustav Schmöller, founded the influential *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, whose members became known by the pejorative label of their working-class opponents – the “socialists of the lectern” (*Kathedersozialisten*).³⁴ The *Verein* was a non-party organization that had provided an intellectual home to two generations of progressive academics like Lujo Brentano and Max Weber. Its members disavowed

³¹ Liebknecht cited in Beatrix W. Bouvier, *Französische Revolution und deutsche Arbeiterbewegung* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1982), p. 250.

³² This nickname was coined by the Prince Hohenlohe.

³³ See, for example, Georg Fesser, *Linksliberalismus und Arbeiterbewegung: Die Stellung der Deutschen Fortschrittspartei zur Arbeiterbewegung 1861–1866* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976).

³⁴ The term was coined in 1871 by Heinrich Oppenheim, a “Manchesterite” writing for the influential liberal newspaper *Nationalzeitung*.

extreme *laissez-faire* Manchesterism and increasingly sought to address the social question with a combination of state regulations, the establishment of binding collective bargaining procedures, and the strengthening of workers' self-help cooperatives.

Finding himself wholeheartedly agreeing with Bebel's skeptical position on the *Verein* liberals, Bernstein decided to join the "Eisenacher" party on the spot. Presented to the party leader as the nephew of the prominent liberal publisher Aaron Bernstein, and thus a "special catch," the young Bernstein was duly impressed when, during their brief conversation, Bebel boldly and confidently predicted that capitalism would inevitably "collapse" in "at the latest, twenty years."³⁵ Only a year later, Europe was hit by the 1873 Great Depression, which continued to smolder for two economically difficult decades. This event contributed much to the almost religious belief of many social democrats that Bebel's great *Kladderadatsch* – the breakdown of bourgeois society as predicted in Marx's and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* – was just around the corner. On the other hand, with the onset of the Great Depression most liberal advocates of social reform found themselves caught between the contempt of an independent, democratic labor movement and Bismarck's increasing scorn of liberal principles, particularly his increasing disenchantment with free-trade policies. No longer politically dependent on their support for helping to forge a German Reich, Bismarck could now return to his natural inclination of maintaining a semi-feudal authoritarian rule amidst the dynamics of a modern industrial state. The destruction of a small remaining liberal-democratic political force could now be completed, signalling the end of a short-lived liberal age in Germany.³⁶

Facing the equally dismal options of either risking a continued cooption of their movement by Bismarck or their likely political defeat, the national-liberals chose the former. Even the Catholic Center Party, weakened by the years of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, caved in. By the end of the 1870s, the remarkable realignment of German political forces was under way. The conservative "Black-Blue Alliance" which included heavy industry, large landowners, parts of the conservative peasantry, the military, and most of the state bureaucracy, began to fall into place. Beset by internal division and self-doubt, and finding themselves outmanoeuvred by a shrewd chancellor who had appropriated their liberal *kleindeutsch* dream for his own conservative constituency, progressives conceded defeat and abandoned their demands for constitutional reform.

³⁵ *ES*, p. 6.

³⁶ See Abraham J. Peck, *Radicals and Reactionaries: The Crisis of Conservatism in Wilhelmine Germany* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1978), p. 4.

Increasingly disillusioned with domestic politics, the *Kathedersozialist* Lujo Brentano summed up the hopeless position of liberalism:

How sad are our current affairs. I would prepare a critique of Bismarck if I thought it would do any good, but after careful consideration I am convinced that I should keep my resolution not to concern myself with contemporary affairs any longer. If I could read Assyrian, I'd start a book on the ancient Assyrian economy, if only to forget the economic policies of modern Germany.³⁷

Moreover, liberalism's inability to reach the working class, and the failure to cross confessional lines prevented the liberals from consolidating political power at a crucial historical juncture. As a result, the German bourgeoisie remained woefully divided into separate reform movements throughout the Wilhelmine Era. Unable to match its Catholic and socialist counterparts in developing a fairly solid political subculture based on a coherent *Weltanschauung*, German liberalism continued its decline as a major political force.³⁸

Having moved on to a new and better paid job as a bank clerk at S. & L. Rothschild in Berlin, Bernstein, the new socialist convert, could now afford to engage in extensive volunteer work on behalf of the party. Though his talents as an agitator and public speaker were not overwhelming, his committed work ethic helped him to rise quickly through the party ranks. Ignaz Auer, the future SPD secretary, took an immediate liking to his fellow Berliner. Standing in for Bernstein's older brother Max, who did not share Ede's enthusiasm for working-class politics, Auer imparted to his protégé the ancient arts of rhetoric and public speaking. Eventually, Bernstein was placed on the party's "lecturer list," which guaranteed him several speaking engagements each month. Bernstein never forgot the kindness shown to him by his first mentor, and he published a touching eulogy after Auer's premature death in 1907.³⁹

Gradually initiated into the intricacies of party life, Bernstein spent entire weekends on the stump, often forced to defend his socialist convictions against the fists and stones of reactionary small-town crowds. Prussian police laws made it easy for local authorities to use the flimsiest excuses to close down public gatherings organized by the labor movement. Yet, despite such hardships, the young orator persevered, gradually emerging as a leading figure in a growing political movement that offered industrial workers more than simple membership in a voluntary association. Indeed, an increasingly self-conscious and confident German Social Democratic Party was preaching a new and all-encompassing

³⁷ Brentano cited in James J. Sheehan, *The Career of Lujo Brentano: A Study of Liberalism and Social Reform in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 94.

³⁸ See Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, p. 164.

³⁹ Eduard Bernstein, *Ignaz Auer, Eine Gedenkschrift* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1907).

Weltanschauung that was consciously set apart from liberalism, its rival progressive tradition.

German social democracy from Lassalle's *ADAV* to Engels' *Anti-Dühring*

The movement to which Bernstein would devote his life began as a conglomeration of joint artisans' and laborers' educational associations (*Arbeiterbildungsvereine*) – a forceful reminder of the liberal roots of social democracy. After all, voluntary “free associations” were the crucial forms of social organization that had allowed the early liberal bourgeoisie to coordinate its social struggle against the centralized, corporatist *Stände* of the semi-feudal German states. It was only in the wake of the 1848 revolutions that workers' associations consciously formulated political demands for representative democracy and civil rights in the name of the “Fourth Estate.”⁴⁰ After the collapse of the Frankfurt National Assembly and the victory of conservative forces, workers' associations were frequently outlawed. Thus, the political forces of social democracy remained dormant over the next fifteen years.

But as liberal forces began to gain ground in the late 1850s, localized labor associations sprang up once again. Philosophically, the new socialist movement of the 1860s was an eclectic plant, growing on soil previously fertilized by the ideas of utopians like Wilhelm Weitling and Karl Grün; progressive liberals like Carl Rodbertus and Eugen Dühring; revolutionary democrats like Georg Büchner and Moses Hess; idealist state socialists like Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Ferdinand Lassalle; and historical materialists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.⁴¹

Because they were forged in political isolation in London, Marx's and Engels' political ideas initially had only a very limited influence on the German workers' movement. In fact, throughout the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, Marx's and Engels' writings were very little known in their native land.⁴² Instead, the main players in the German

⁴⁰ See Elfi Pracht, *Parliamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1867–1914* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlag, 1990).

⁴¹ For detailed accounts of the early years of German social democracy, see, for example, Roger Morgan, *The German Social Democrats and the First International, 1864–1872* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965); Richard W. Reichard, *Crippled from Birth: German Social Democracy 1844–1870* (Ames, IO: Iowa State UP, 1969); Wolfgang Abendroth, *Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* (Frankfurt: Stimme Verlag, 1969); Susanne Miller, *Das Problem der Freiheit im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz, 1974); Gary P. Steenson, “Not One Man! Not One Penny!” German Social Democracy, 1863–1914 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981); and Miller and Pothoff, *A History of German Social Democracy*.

⁴² For an excellent recent discussion of the reception of Marx's work in those years, see

labor movement of the 1860s were radical members of the bourgeoisie like Friedrich Albert Lange and Johann Jacoby, who presided over local workers' associations and cooperatives. Initially, they emphasized emancipatory interests linking the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but as the labor movement acquired numerical strength, its strategic tendency to ally itself with liberal-democratic demands was frustrated by the Liberals' unwillingness to protect the interests of workers in the Reichstag of the North German Federation.⁴³ As a result, working-class organizations began to draw away from liberal influences. Lange, for example, bemoaned the short-sighted policies of the Liberals, adding that workers were already showing much more interest in political papers that stressed the conflictual nature between the two classes – a phenomenon that, no doubt, had its origins in the poor political experience of workers with liberal parties.⁴⁴ Workers' associations became quickly radicalized, their leaders insisting on their organizational independence from "bourgeois forces."⁴⁵

This trend to regard all non-working classes as "one reactionary mass" was further amplified by Ferdinand Lassalle, a flamboyant lawyer, philosopher, *bon vivant*, self-appointed "leader of the toiling masses," and Marx's main ideological rival in the German workers' movement. The son of a wealthy Jewish merchant, Lassalle had attracted national attention when he successfully represented the Countess Sophie von Hatzfeldt in her divorce and property suit against her Junker husband. Soon thereafter, Lassalle proved to possess more than mere slick courtroom manners when he wrote a number of impressive studies on legal and economic philosophy. Borrowing heavily from Marx's economic ideas without acknowledging his sources, Lassalle revelled in the role of a modern-day democratic tribune. His famous lectures on the Labor Question were well attended; and his 1863 pamphlet, *Open Address*, commanded an almost mystical reputation as "revelatory scripture" in most workers' circles.

Disregarding Marx's envious tirades directed against his "superficial philosophical eclecticism" and his "unbearable arrogance," Lassalle merrily continued promoting his own reputation at least as much as he did his socialist cause. Before long his rhetorical skills, amorous adventures, and flashy political manoeuvres had coalesced into the populist "Lassalle Legend." Despite his flaunted anti-aristocratic rhetoric, Lassalle

Steenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin*, pp. 47–107.

⁴³ See Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy*, pp. 117–118.

⁴⁴ Lange cited in Peter Irmer, "Friedrich A. Lange – ein politischer Agitator in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung," in J. H. Knoll and J. H. Schöps, eds. *Friedrich Albert Lange, Leben und Werk* (Duisburg: Walter Braun Verlag, 1975), p. 13.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Shlomo Na'aman, "F. A. Lange in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung," in *ibid.*, pp. 20–55; and August Bebel, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin: Dietz, 1986).

used his numerous connections to influential Junkers, acquired with the help of the Countess, to suggest shady political “bargains” to Chancellor Bismarck himself. It is an impressive testimony to Lassalle’s considerable political talent that the “Iron Chancellor,” who was not noted for praising his opponents, called the socialist leader a “remarkable leader personality” with “obvious nationalist and royalist convictions.”⁴⁶

In 1863, Lassalle founded the “General German Workers’ Association” (ADAV), the first German mass-based labor organization. Equally denouncing liberal, conservative, and Junker forces, he observed with great satisfaction that his political ideas had taken root in the fertile soil of the German labor movement. At the core of his social theory was the demand for universal suffrage as the decisive means for the self-emancipation of the proletariat, followed by the idea of organizing the modern production process along the lines of decentralized producer cooperatives which, supported by the state, would guarantee workers access to the “full value of their labor.” In Lassalle’s opinion, such producer cooperatives would ease the peaceful transition of capitalism to a new society based upon a socialist mode of production. Mixing his anti-liberal, Hegel-influenced theory of state with a good dose of J. G. Fichte’s social philosophy and Marx’s emphasis on the redemptive power of the proletariat, Lassalle succeeded in forming the eclectic nucleus of a distinct labor ideology. Though never exceeding 20,000 members, Lassalle’s organization attracted engaged workers who represented, as he put it, “the rock on which the socialist church will be built.”

In 1864, his brilliant career was cut short by a bullet fired at him in a duel over a failed love affair with a seventeen-year-old countess. The romantic circumstances surrounding Lassalle’s premature death at the age of thirty-nine enhanced his status overnight from that of a “mere” hero of the proletariat to the tragic messianic martyr of the fledgling German labor movement. In fact, Bernstein would later seek to dispel these romantic myths. However, while the “Lassalle Legend” continued to spread, his political movement wilted. The absence of a charismatic leader combined with the organizational ineptitude and heavy-handed authoritarian style of Johann-Baptiste Schweitzer, the new chairman, led to the slow dissolution of the ADAV. It is conceivable that Lassalle’s early death prevented the development of a national-socialist movement that would have thwarted the emergence of Marx’s less state-oriented socialism.⁴⁷

In 1869, the Marxist “Eisenacher” socialists – the faction Bernstein joined in 1872 – emerged from the “Congress of German Workers’

⁴⁶ *EB*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁷ Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, p. 27.

Associations" (VDAV) as the ideological and political rivals of the "Lassalleans." The Eisenachers were led by Bernstein's youthful hero, August Bebel, and his equally charismatic brother-in-arms Wilhelm Liebknecht, a proud descendant of Martin Luther. A close personal friend of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Liebknecht had spent thirteen years in exile in London before returning to Germany in the early 1860s. Unlike Bebel, who took organizational matters in hand, Liebknecht, keenly aware of the need for a unifying worldview that would set workers apart from the liberal demands of the "bourgeoisie," was more interested in theoretical issues. Seeking to give the Eisenachers an easily understandable ideological direction, Liebknecht created his own vulgarized version of "Marxism," which sometimes drew harsh critiques from the founders in London. Instead of being served Lassallean exhortations, the working class was now being enticed by a new dictum: "Marx is Allah and Liebknecht is his prophet."⁴⁸ Engels soon realized that Liebknecht's effective attacks on competing socialist schools corresponded to his own main objective: the marketing of a Marxist worldview as the only brand of socialism corresponding to modern social and economic conditions.

Pronouncing with almost apodictic finality the fate of capitalism in the memorable lines of their famous 1847 *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels could have hardly imagined the enormous influence of their short pamphlet on generations of theorists and activists of the labor movement. In connecting justice with science, idealist romanticism with hard-headed empiricism, and highly emotional polemics with a detached analysis of early industrial society, the almost prosaic language of this perhaps most powerful political treatise in modern history effortlessly incorporated the most audacious intellectual developments of the nineteenth century. Most of all, its authors emphasized over and over again what they considered to be their most distinctive contribution to socialist theory: the scientific demonstration of the dialectical process of capitalism's self-destruction, "objectively" leading to the coming of a socialist order.

Finding the principles of revolutionary Marxism more in line with both the existing sociopolitical conditions in the Empire and his disdain of the bourgeoisie, Liebknecht teamed up with Bebel, the young chairman of the Leipzig Workers' Educational Association, to found Europe's most successful labor party. Using the power vacuum created by Lassalle's death to their own advantage, Bebel and Liebknecht achieved within six years what socialist theorists had envisioned for decades: the organizational and ideological unification of the German labor movement. Acting

⁴⁸ See Karl Kautsky, *Erinnerungen und Erörterungen*, ed. Benedikt Kautsky (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1960), p. 374.

against Engels' advice, and relying on his own remarkable political instincts, Bebel succeeded in bringing together the two warring labor associations.

Having grown tired of the suicidal infighting that threatened the existence of the entire movement, Bebel was willing to compromise the purity of Marxist theory in order to enhance political effectiveness. Bernstein supported his party leader and encouraged him to follow his strategy against the resistance put up by the founders in London: "Without indulging in delusions about the Lassalleans it has become clear that we have to make concessions to them."⁴⁹

At the famous 1875 Gotha Party Conference, which Bernstein attended as an Eisenacher delegate, the two socialist parties merged into an effective national "party of the proletariat" – the German Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP), which later dropped the word "Workers" from its title. Liebknecht, one of the few recognized Eisenacher authorities on matters of political theory, was commissioned to draft a new party program.⁵⁰ Although the "unification program" of Gotha represented a well-designed theoretical compromise drawing most of its inspiration from Marxist ideas, it met with stern disapproval from Marx and Engels. In their view, it had failed to rid itself of the "fundamentally flawed influence of Lassalle," notably his emphasis on "the iron law of wages" and his demand for "the establishment of state-aided socialist producer cooperatives under the control of the working people."⁵¹

The ideological discussions surrounding the Gotha Program, however, were not the first socialist debates on matters of political theory. Already in 1873, Bernstein had exhibited his lifelong talent for stirring up trouble. The subject of the dispute was Eugen Dühring, a radical economist and philosopher, who was to lose his academic post at the University of Berlin in 1877 because of his "anti-Prussian" political views. Seeking to unite positivism and idealism in his fierce philosophical attack against church and state, Dühring followed in the intellectual footsteps of the American economist Henry Carey. Ultimately, Dühring developed an eclectic theory culminating in the concept of "intersubjective morality" in "socialitary systems" of the future. Like Lujo Brentano, Dühring supported trade unions as the chief instrument for abolishing social inequities based on "wage-slavery."⁵²

⁴⁹ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ For Liebknecht's role in drafting the Gotha Program, see Bernstein, *Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre*, pp. 45–47.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 525–541.

⁵² Eugen Dühring, *Careys Umwälzung der Volkswirtschaftslehre und Sozialwissenschaft* (Munich: Fleischmann, 1865); and *Cursus der National und Sozialökonomie* (Leipzig:

Enthusiastically approving of Dühring's latest book, *A Course in Political Economy and Socialism*, in which the blind private scholar (*Privatgelehrter*) had vehemently attacked the allegedly "scientific" foundations of Marxian economics, Bernstein bought several copies of Dühring's earlier work and sent them to a number of leading socialists.⁵³ In particular, Bernstein seemed attracted to the *Privatgelehrter's* eclectic molding of liberalism, science, ethics, and reformism into an attractive alternative position situated between Marx's Hegelian "abstractions" and Lassalle's anti-liberal state socialism. In his youthful enthusiasm for Dühring's left-liberal ideals, Bernstein was even willing to suspend his judgment on the scholar's virulent anti-Semitism. Paying him several visits, the "Jew, Bernstein" asked for, and received, personal instruction from the sworn enemy of "Jewish socialism."

Moreover, Bernstein had convinced himself that Dühring's books represented highly effective pieces of socialist propaganda. Bebel agreed. Considering Dühring's latest book a well-written treatise, Bebel, too, praised his arguments from a pragmatic point of view: "I couldn't care less about the method as long as it advances our cause."⁵⁴ He even published a glowing article in *Der Volksstaat*, announcing Dühring as the "new communist."⁵⁵ It is a testimony to the German labor movement's theoretical weakness in the early 1870s that both men felt that the ideas of Dühring and Marx could be reconciled. Only the doctrinal watchdog, Liebknecht, recognized the potential harm a "liberal variant" of socialism could inflict upon the ideological unification of the movement under Marxist hegemony.

Much to the surprise of his less sophisticated comrades, however, "Ol' Liebknecht" proved incapable of countering Dühring's intellectual attacks from a seasoned Marxist point of view. Eager to avoid further embarrassment, he instead pleaded with Marx's "real prophet" – Friedrich Engels – to lead the charge against Dühring's "heresies." Engels grudgingly obliged with a series of articles in *Der Volksstaat*, which, save for a few hard-core Lassalleans, drew an enthusiastic response from the membership. Later collected in a book commonly known as *Anti-Dühring*, Engels' essays proved to be the magic potion for exorcizing the spectre of "eclecticism" from the party.

Rivaled in its popularity only by Bebel's 1879 *Women under Socialism* and Karl Kautsky's 1891 *Das Erfurter Programm*, the shortened version of

Reisland, 1925).

⁵³ Eugen Dühring, *Kritische Geschichte der Nationalökonomie und des Sozialismus*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Naumann, 1900).

⁵⁴ Bebel cited in Bernstein, *ES*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Gustav Mayer, *Friedrich Engels* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), p. 237.

Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, entitled *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, created, almost overnight, a simplified, easily understandable version of the Marxist "communist world outlook."⁵⁶ Besides giving the German labor movement a firm ideological foundation, *Anti-Dühring* imparted to socialist theorists like Kautsky and Bernstein a strong sense of mission, which would be invaluable for their connection to the movement and the further popularization of Marxist thought. Before long, scores of new party pamphlets appeared, simplifying Engels' arguments even further.

Indeed, the "General" (as Engels was called by his followers) had managed to condense the rather obscure themes in *Capital* into a few main points: the inevitable breakdown of capitalism; the vengeance of history; and the end of all class struggles in the coming rule of the proletariat. To those workers who readily embraced its deterministic logic, Engels' "communist world outlook" offered a distinct sense of class solidarity and a common political language upon which to build institutional support. Most importantly, however, it helped eclipse the philosophical eclecticism, as well as any remaining vestiges of "Lassalleanism," in the German labor movement.

⁵⁶ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *MECW* 25, p. 8. For an insightful analysis of the "theological" aspects of Marxism, see George Lichtheim, "The Concept of Ideology," *History and Theory* 4.2 (1965), pp. 172–173; and Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887–1912*.

2 Persecution and exile

Bismarck's anti-socialist laws

The publication of Engels' *Anti-Dühring* and the quick dissemination of its main ideas was but one of several reasons for the inordinately swift enshrinement of revolutionary Marxism as the gospel of the German labor movement. The tumultuous 1880s provided three additional elements needed for the ultimate triumph of Marxist doctrine: firstly, possessing the necessary instincts required for organizational success, young Marxists like Eduard Bernstein easily acquired the key theoretical and political positions of the rapidly expanding labor movement. Secondly, and more importantly, the eventual hegemony of Marxist ideology was the unintended result of the Bismarck government's political persecution of social democracy. Thirdly, Germany's prolonged economic recession coupled with the political decline of German liberalism seemed to bear out Marx's grand vision. Indeed, Marxist ideology would have never planted its roots so firmly into the soil of German social democracy had not the actual socioeconomic conditions in the 1880s corresponded to its revolutionary message.

In 1878, Chancellor Bismarck used two assassination attempts on the Kaiser to create a frantic political climate which allowed him – with the votes of the national-liberals – to introduce a set of so-called “anti-socialist laws,” outlawing public meetings of the SPD and closing down most of its party publications. True to his favorite anti-1848 slogan, “The only effective weapons against democrats are soldiers,” Bismarck masterfully employed powerful nationalist symbols in his all-out war against the socialist “fellows without a fatherland” (*vaterlandslose Gesellen*), who routinely refused to join their colleagues in parliament in their customary salute to the Imperial insignia. Wasn't it obvious that the “Reds” were behind the plot to kill the Kaiser if they openly praised the “heroic efforts” of the 1871 Paris Communards, thus embracing “the gospel of those murderers and incendiaries”?¹ Employing what has been described as the

¹ Bismarck quoted in Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany*, p. 87.

technique of “negative integration,” Bismarck developed a strategy of political rule that made use of a sociopsychic opposition between “in-groups” and “out-groups” and thus stylised internal conflicts so as to lead a majority of elements “loyal to the Empire” against a minority of “enemies of the Empire.” As Hans-Ulrich Wehler noted, the “latter had to be made to appear a ‘serious danger’ without ever posing any real threat to the system” and “the various coalitions of groups loyal to the Empire were held together primarily by their enmity towards a common foe – in other words, on a negative basis.”²

Wisely judging their constituency as too small in number to challenge the governmental reprisals on the streets, the leaders of the German labor movement chose to dissolve “officially” their centralized party organization while continuing illegal underground meetings. Emboldened by the lack of resistance, the police stepped up their activities and began to exile prominent social democrats from their home towns. The full breadth of the social ramifications of Bismarck’s initiative on the lives of socialist activists was gradually revealed within the next twelve months. Under immense police pressure, even small local party organizations were forced to dissolve. Hundreds of party functionaries, members, and sympathizers lost their jobs, and, as Bebel reported angrily, many “comrades were driven from their homes like mangy dogs.”³

Until the lapse of the anti-socialist laws twelve years later, some 352 political associations were dissolved and 1,229 publications, including 104 newspapers and periodicals, were banned.⁴ The few remaining socialist publications had to endure constant governmental interference and heavy censorship. Crippled in its ability to recruit new members, the SPD leadership nonetheless secretly founded a central “illegal” party organ, *Der Sozialdemokrat*. The journal’s main task consisted of reporting on the repressive situation in Germany, thus keeping socialist underground networks informed and defiant. To ease the pressure on editors and contributors, Bebel suggested the editorship of the paper be moved to politically safe Switzerland, where it was put together and printed. Scores of socialist volunteers smuggled thousands of copies out of Switzerland and distributed them illegally among members of the German working class and their bourgeois sympathizers.

Although Bismarck had shrewdly resisted the temptation to revoke the Reichstag mandates of the social democratic representatives for fear of

² Hans-Wehler, *The German Empire 1871–1918* (Dover, NH: Berg, 1985), p. 91.

³ August Bebel cited in Julius Braunthal, *History of the International*, 3 vols., trans. Henry Collins, Peter Ford, and Kenneth Mitchell (New York: Praeger, 1980), vol. I, p. 260.

⁴ Alex Hall, *Scandal, Sensation and Social Democracy: The SPD Press and Wilhelmine Germany 1890–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), p. 14.

turning them into political “martyrs,” the party leadership quickly grasped that their “official” meetings in parliament were ill suited for a discussion of the party’s internal affairs. In order to prevent the alienation of the parliamentary *Fraktion* from the party base, the SPD leadership resolved to conduct secret party congresses on foreign soil. During the years of persecution, the party managed to organize three such meetings in Switzerland and Denmark, which proved to be invaluable for consolidating and boosting morale of the German labor movement. All prominent members of the SPD – some living abroad in exile – were reunited and could therefore develop a coordinated strategy of underground resistance.

Already at their first secret party conference, held in the romantic surroundings of Castle Wyden in Switzerland, the delegates had the unpleasant task of debating the fate of two prominent members who had repeatedly challenged the party’s resolution to protect its remaining Reichstag mandates by sticking to a “policy of strict legality” in Germany. Johann Most and Wilhelm Hasselmann dismissed the party’s strategy as “cowardice” and presented themselves as the only genuine revolutionary opposition to Bismarck’s rule of the “iron fist.” As Henry Tudor emphasizes, the debate over these two “renegades” afforded Bernstein one of his first opportunities to spell out a carefully “genuine” Marxist position in print.⁵

Ultimately, the SPD delegates in Wyden recognized that it was better to react to the anarchist challenge with drastic measures than to engage in a drawn-out discussion that would give Most and Hasselmann the opportunity to propagate their views even further. Expelled from the party at the Wyden Congress, Most emigrated to London and founded his own journal, *Die Freiheit* (*Liberty*), which wedded the demands of *The Communist Manifesto* with anarchist calls for extraparlimentary, revolutionary action. Hasselmann, a previously well-respected SPD member of parliament, shared Most’s fate, and soon began openly to disavow his former party by aligning himself with obscure Russian Nihilists.⁶

Bernstein managed to attend all three underground party meetings as a delegate – the 1883 party congress in Copenhagen only after a long and dangerous trip under a false name. There is no doubt that his political and early editorial activities benefited enormously from these opportunities to meet and personally interact with the most dedicated and brilliant representatives of German social democracy. Moreover, these travels also allowed him to establish personal contacts with other leading European social democrats, like Jules Guesde, Benoit Malon, Paul Lafargue, and

⁵ Tudor, “Introduction,” in *MS*, pp. 4–5.

⁶ *DDS*, p. 49.

William Morris. Most of all, the young socialist energies thrived on the genuine atmosphere of solidarity and cooperation displayed at these memorable underground meetings: "All were filled with the thought, 'We belong together and must support each other.'"⁷

Bismarck quickly adapted to the continued political agitation of the labor movement. He was successful in planting Prussian police informers at the SPD's "illegal" conferences, while at the same time undermining the appeal of social democracy by buying its cooperation.⁸ Throughout the 1880s, he introduced several remarkable pieces of social legislation, supposedly for the "benefit of the German working class": health insurance (1883), accident insurance (1884), and old age and disability insurance (1889).

His double-pronged strategy of persecution and reform did indeed contribute to the increasing polarization of the SPD into a "moderate" and a "radical" wing. The former, attached to the party's "parliamentary road," interpreted the chancellor's social policies as small tokens of his willingness to compromise on major social issues. Led by most of the social democratic *Fraktion* of the Reichstag, the moderates tended to play down the class nature of the movement and emphasized piecemeal reform. Though they were genuinely critical of Bismarck's autocratic state, moderates like Bruno Geiser, Wilhelm Blos, Wilhelm Hasenclever, and Franz Grillenberger were willing to work within the confines of the anti-socialist laws, concentrating on expanding the party's appeal to sectors of the population other than the industrial working class.⁹ In fact, Bismarck's double-pronged strategy produced another unintended side effect that, almost unnoticed, was to impact the overall political strategy of the SPD. By leaving the weak Reichstag as the only "legal" avenue for social democratic agitation, the chancellor forced the movement to link its remaining political identity to parliamentarianism. An early article of Bernstein's encapsulates this new significance of the Reichstag: "Our deputies are sent to the Reichstag to raise the voice of the proletariat, the voice of suffering, the persecuted, the oppressed . . . they are the representatives of the disinherited and the outlawed."¹⁰

At the same time, members of the "radical" faction represented by Bebel and the ideological firebrand Liebknecht continued to emphasize the class-based nature of the SPD and denounced Bismarck's systematic violations of basic liberties. Yet, though they identified themselves in

⁷ Bernstein, *Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991), p. 110.

⁸ *EB*, p. 21.

⁹ Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854–1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), p. 51.

¹⁰ Bernstein cited in Vernon Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party. Social Democracy in Germany 1878–1890* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), p. 132.

varying degrees as followers of Marx and Engels, radicals would have been hard-put if asked to define what constituted “genuine Marxism.”¹¹ On the other hand, even a very simplistic understanding of Marxist doctrine was enough to realize that social reality in Germany seemed to bear out the Marxist message: the chancellor’s stubborn refusal to let the anti-socialist laws lapse highlighted the conservative stance of the bourgeoisie; and, by voting for the anti-socialist laws, Liberals had betrayed the working class, thus giving political expression to the underlying antagonistic nature of Wilhelmine class structures.

Exile in Switzerland

In 1878, the same fateful year that brought German social democracy Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* and Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws, Eduard Bernstein quit his secure bank job and accepted a position as private secretary to Dr. Karl Höchberg, a wealthy young patron of the SPD. Suffering from the tuberculosis which eventually caused his premature death in 1885, Höchberg was advised to live in Switzerland. Making their residence at first in Lugano and later in Zurich, the two men launched several important publications, among them the socialist journals *Die Zukunft*, and *Jahrbuch für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, which devoted much space to matters of theoretical inquiry. Soon after their arrival in Switzerland, however, the Prussian authorities back in Germany added Bernstein’s name to a substantial list of violators of the anti-socialist laws, thereby blocking his return to Berlin. Bernstein’s long years of exile had begun.

In spite of the bad news from back home, Bernstein enjoyed working for his employer. Höchberg was a gifted intellectual who considered himself a committed socialist and appreciated Marxist theory for its contribution to the critique of bourgeois political economy; ultimately, however, he preferred the left-liberal outlook evident in the ethical socialism of Friedrich Albert Lange.¹² It is not surprising that Marx and Engels saw in their party patron Höchberg a naïve “social philanthropist” with little theoretical understanding of economics who embarrassed their young

¹¹ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, p. 51.

¹² Friedrich Albert Lange’s (1828–1875) most important works are: *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (Iserlohn: Baedeker, 1866; translated by Ernest Chester Thomas as *History of Materialism* [New York: Humanities Press, 1950]); *Die Arbeiterfrage in ihrer Bedeutung für Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Duisburg: Falk & Lange, 1865); and *John Stuart Mills Ansichten über die soziale Frage und die angebliche Umwälzung der Sozialwissenschaft durch Carey* (Duisburg: Falk & Lange, 1866). For the influence of Lange’s neo-Kantianism on Bernstein, see chapter 4; Knoll and Schöps, *Friedrich Albert Lange: Leben und Werk*; Rikli, *Der Revisionismus*; DDS, pp. 152–155; see also my “Historical Materialism and Ethics: Eduard Bernstein’s Revisionist Perspective.”

party with his idealistic reveries.¹³ In fact, Engels' only reason for personally receiving Höchberg in his London residence was his monetary support. Although Bebel assured the "General" that the young patron exerted no real influence in the party, Engels thought it would be best for the SPD to detach itself from this "good but appallingly naive fellow."¹⁴ During their long debates, Bernstein sought to win Höchberg over to the more Marxist perspective which he had himself only recently acquired from his study of Engels' *Anti-Dühring*.

In spite of his newly found distaste for the seductive grip of "German ideologies," it took Bernstein only a year to get himself embroiled in yet another theoretical controversy – one that would cause the severe consternation of Marx and Engels in London. The new dispute involved the anonymous 1879 "Three-Star Article" in Höchberg's *Jahrbuch für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. Allegedly composed by Höchberg and some of his close socialist friends, this ill-conceived essay criticized at length the purported errors committed by German social democracy. In particular, its authors accused the movement of an "exaggerated class bias" which unnecessarily "fanned the hatred of the bourgeoisie", thereby leading to the creation of the anti-socialist laws. In other words, they identified Marxism's alleged penchant for "romanticizing the working class" as the underlying reason for the labor movement's unwillingness to entertain possible alliances with the liberal bourgeoisie.¹⁵

Marx and Engels forcefully repudiated the article in an open letter to the SPD, touching off wild speculations as to the identity of the author(s). While the division of labor remains a mystery, it appears that the essay's main authors were Karl Höchberg, C. A. Schramm, and Karl Flesch. Bernstein's personal involvement in this unfortunate piece of rhetoric was only minimal.¹⁶ At the time, however, Marx and Engels suspected Bernstein of more active participation, and hence came to doubt his loyalty to Marxist socialism. Already displeased with his role in the recent "Dühring Affair," the London exiles hinted that Bernstein's career in the SPD had become more than tenuous.

Around the same time, Georg von Vollmar decided to relinquish his position as acting editor of *Der Sozialdemokrat*, the party's recently established chief organ. Party leader Bebel, who felt that Bernstein's occasional "lapses" ought to be attributed to his youthful inexperience and not to his lack of loyalty to the cause, recommended that Bernstein

¹³ *Bebel BWE*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *DDS*, p. 45.

¹⁵ "Rückblicke auf die sozialistische Bewegung in Deutschland," in *Jahrbuch für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik I* (1879), pp. 75–96.

¹⁶ Peter Gay (*DDS*, p. 44) speculates that the article was actually written by Karl Flesch, who later became a well-known liberal reformer and city councillor of Frankfurt.

succeed the Bavarian party leader as the paper's new permanent editor-in-chief. In order to rehabilitate Bernstein's reputation with Marx and Engels, Bebel was personally prepared to accompany the young penitent on his December 1880 "Canossa Pilgrimage" to England. He was convinced that his endorsement would persuade the elders that Bernstein's Marxist roots were indeed strong enough to warrant such a responsible position. As Bebel expected, the trip proved extremely successful. Not only did Bernstein meet the two theoretical fathers of German social democracy, but he also made his first contacts with various leaders of the British labor movement. Marx received the young "sinner" in a friendly manner at his home and engaged him in a long political debate which was later continued in the famous Café Royal in Piccadilly Circus. Bernstein's rapport with Engels was even better. Over several glasses of fine Bordeaux, the "General" became convinced of the young man's sincere dedication to Marxist socialism.¹⁷ In the ensuing years, their mutual sympathies expanded into an intimate friendship that lasted until Engels' death in 1895.¹⁸

Soon, the intimate network of Bernstein-Bebel-Engels was expanded to include the Austrian socialist Karl Kautsky. Already a year before his trip to London, Bernstein had made the acquaintance of this young intellectual firebrand in Zurich. Working toward a PhD degree in the history of philosophy and anthropology at the University of Vienna, Kautsky had been raised on a steady diet of positivism and evolutionary materialism, counting among his favorite thinkers Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and Ludwig Büchner. Having joined the newly established Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1875, the young Viennese soon established himself as a regular contributor to the most prestigious German and Austrian socialist journals, *Vorwärts*, *Volkstaat*, *Die Gleichheit*, and *Der Sozialist*. Preoccupied with bringing natural science and Darwinism to the service of socialism, Kautsky's early articles sought to connect the evolutionary notion of the "struggle for survival" to "instinctive solidarity rules," allegedly operating in all human societies.¹⁹ Permeated by a good dose of Büchner's naturalism, while at the same time not adverse to Thomas Henry Buckle's heroic idealism or George Sand's

¹⁷ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, p. 153.

¹⁸ For the correspondence between Bernstein and Engels, see *Bernstein BWE*. The literature on the relationship between Bernstein and Engels is vast; the following is only a short selection: Gustav Mayer, *Friedrich Engels*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1934); Angel, *Eduard Bernstein et L'Evolution du Socialisme Allemand*, pp. 99–176; Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*, pp. 203–300; Bo Gustafsson, *Marxismus und Revisionismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972), pp. 35–88; Lehnert, *Reform und Revolution in der Strategiediskussionen der klassischen Sozialdemokratie*, pp. 106–205; *MS*, pp. 1–37.

¹⁹ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, pp. 31–32.

romanticism, Kautsky's early social theory was a contradictory maze of pseudo-materialism and ethical idealism – a peculiar mixture reflected in his political engagement which oscillated between the romantic radicalism of the Austrian anarchists Josef and Andreas Scheu and the more moderate “Austrian Lassalleanism” of Heinrich Oberwinder.

However, Kautsky's theoretical outlook fundamentally changed in the winter of 1879–80 when he finally completed his study of Engels' *Anti-Dühring*. His jubilant praise for the book's main theses corresponded with the more sobering recognition that he had learned nothing but a “frightful mass of nonsense at the university.”²⁰ In fact, Kautsky was ready to give up his future academic plans, and he barely hesitated to abandon his dissertation research. Having firmly resolved to pursue a career as a socialist journalist, the young Viennese was pleased to accept Höchberg's offer to work as his second editorial assistant alongside Bernstein. Although Kautsky remained in Zurich for only six months, the two “young Turks” immediately embarked upon one of the most remarkable friendships in socialist history.²¹

Between the years 1879 and 1932, “Ede” and the “Baron” (as Kautsky was called after his weakness for exquisite clothes) exchanged more than a thousand letters, making their correspondence one of the most voluminous in the history of the European labor movement.²² Aside from being emotionally rewarding, Bernstein's and Kautsky's common activities in Zurich set the stage for their future stellar careers in the SPD. Kautsky assisted his slightly older friend with difficult theoretical problems in the fields of anthropology, biology, and sociology, while Bernstein's editorial experience and his practical understanding of organizational party matters proved to be immensely beneficial to the abstract Viennese intellectual. Moreover, Bernstein introduced his friend to the various circles of socialist emigrés – Russians, Italians, and Germans – who had found a home in the politically liberal Zurich of the early 1880s. Over the next months the two young socialists became inseparable – a “sort of red Orestes and Pylades.”²³ Together, they established a *Stammtisch* (“regu-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²¹ See Kautsky, *Erinnerungen und Erörterungen*. Important intellectual biographies of Karl Kautsky include: Walter Holzheuer, *Karl Kautskys Werk als Weltanschauung. Beitrag zur Ideologie der Sozialdemokratie vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Beck, 1972); Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*; Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880–1938*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London: New Left Books, 1979); Reinhold Hünlich, *Karl Kautsky und der Marxismus der II Internationale* (Marburg: Verlag Arbeiterbewegung und Gesellschaftswissenschaft, 1981); Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen: Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986); Dick Geary, *Karl Kautsky* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987); and John H. Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky: Marxism, Revolution & Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994).

²² For a discussion of these letters, see Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky*.

²³ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, p. 46.

lar drinking table”) in their favorite beer pubs, where, under the direction of fellow-exile Julius Motteler, they composed and sang sarcastic verses mocking the repressive political conditions in Germany. Together, the “Marxist twins” drew up letters of inquiry to Engels in London, and engaged in a host of other literary endeavors. One of their first common intellectual projects was a collection of Marx’s writings which led to the 1886/87 establishment of an “International Socialist Library,” a series that started with *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx*.²⁴

Indeed, Bernstein and Kautsky formulated their common Marxist position from a joint study of primary sources, often commencing early in the morning and, interrupted only by lunch and a brief walk, continuing late into the night.²⁵ Their increasingly sophisticated Marxist analyses speculated on the eventual outcome of the long period of economic stagnation and high unemployment that followed the Great Depression of 1873 and lingered on in Germany throughout the 1880s. Together with August Bebel, both men represented the party’s radical “Marxist” wing, accepting and defending Marx’s predictions that economic crises of such an extent as then prevailed would eventually lead to a general collapse of capitalist society.²⁶ Many of Bernstein’s political articles written between 1882 and 1888 under the pseudonyms “Leo” or “Vitellius,” reflect this gloomy outlook and the concomitant hope for a swift revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat.²⁷

In addition to drawing a regular paycheck as a full-time party employee, Bernstein’s new position as editor-in-chief of *Der Sozialdemokrat* afforded him the opportunity to establish himself as a leading theoretical voice within German social democracy. Initially, however, Bernstein doubted whether he was experienced enough to handle this challenging position. Confiding his qualms to Engels, the young editor asked outright whether it might not be better if he were replaced by a more “seasoned” comrade. Engels’ reassuring response came swiftly:

You have directed our paper with much skill, found the right tone, and developed a fine sense of humor. For the editorship of a newspaper one does not need to display one’s scholasticism; what matters is one’s ability to grasp the political situation in an instant. This you have proven almost every single time. Kautsky, on the other hand, has failed in this regard, because he always loses himself in endless elaborations of minor points.²⁸

In a letter to Bebel, Engels was even more explicit in his criticism of Kautsky, expressing severe reservations about what he perceived to be

²⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Karl Marx’ ökonomische Lehren* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1887).

²⁵ Karl Kautsky, “Eduard Bernstein,” p. 44.

²⁶ *C I*, p. 20.

²⁷ Three of these articles have been translated by Tudor and Tudor in *MS*, pp. 38–50.

²⁸ Engels to Bernstein (April 14, 1881) in *Bernstein BWE*, p. 25.

Kautsky's lingering dogmatism: "I believe that Bernstein fits the job much better than Kautsky . . . Recently, Kautsky spent some time here [in London] and I had a serious clash with him. This leads me to believe that in the future, significant differences of opinion between him and us [Engels and Bebel] could easily arise."²⁹ Following Marx, who regarded Kautsky as a "talented drinker," "superwise," and a "mediocre character with a small-minded outlook,"³⁰ the "General" believed the underlying reasons for his own problems with the young hothead lay in Kautsky's "innate pedantry and obvious tendency to split hairs . . . For a newspaper, such a dogmatist is truly a disaster."³¹ On the other hand, Bernstein's rather detached objectivism, his ability to mediate between different sides, and his keen political eye made him an excellent choice.

Seeking to teach the "Baron" a lesson, Engels published his own articles in Bernstein's *Der Sozialdemokrat*, politely but firmly turning down Kautsky's repeated requests to work with him on his more theoretical *Neue Zeit*, a journal which Kautsky had proudly founded in 1883 with the help of the German socialist publisher J. H. W. Dietz. Given that the journal's expressed purpose was to continue the theoretical tradition of Marx's *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*,³² the fledgling Marxist intellectual must have been especially pained by Engels' reservations. In fact, it was rather ironic that Kautsky, the editor-in-chief of the SPD's sole "legal" publication, remained on the editorial fringes of the party, while Bernstein, editing the party's "illegal" organ in Switzerland, found himself at the ideological center of the movement. But Kautsky soon realized that a smooth working relationship with Engels was an indispensable precondition for his future theoretical career. Dutifully, he swallowed his youthful pride and embarked on a series of "study trips" to England, receiving "private lessons" in Marxist theory from the "General" himself. By 1887, the aging tutor could take great pride in the intellectual "progress" of his earnest pupil, confiding to a friend that he had begun to trust in Kautsky's theoretical abilities "like my own."³³

Bernstein, on the other hand, soon found himself in the midst of a nasty dispute over his "orthodox Marxist" editorial style. Moderates in the Reichstag Fraktion were beginning to criticize what they considered the increasingly "radical" and "one-sided" tone of *Der Sozialdemokrat*. Led by Wilhelm Blos, Wilhelm Hasenclever, and Ernst Breuel, a number of

²⁹ Engels to Bebel (February 11, 1881) in *Bebel BWE*, p. 102.

³⁰ Marx cited in Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, p. 47.

³¹ Engels to Bebel (August 25, 1881) in *Bebel BWE*, p. 114.

³² Engels to Kautsky (November 15, 1882) in *MEW* 35, p. 399. Even two years later, Engels still refused to acknowledge Kautsky's *Neue Zeit* as one of several "official" SPD party organs.

³³ Engels to F. A. Sorge (April 6, 1887) in *MEW* 36, p. 635.

German representatives publicly disavowed any responsibility for the content of the journal's articles. Bernstein retaliated with a sharp attack on Breuel, and soon accusation followed accusation.³⁴ Supported by Kautsky and Bebel, Bernstein doggedly fought against the moderates' efforts to muzzle the Marxist rhetoric of his paper, bravely resisting their attempts to bring *Der Sozialdemokrat* more directly under their control.

While the conflicting attitude of German socialists toward Bismarck's social legislation often lay at the core of the dispute, the ongoing controversy between moderates and radicals assumed a particularly heated character when Bernstein permitted the publication of two articles which identified *all* social democrats as "true communists, revolutionaries, and enemies of the state" and openly endorsed the "use of violence against state-supported violence."³⁵ Fearing a new round of repressive measures against German socialist leaders, even Bebel was outraged. Engels, who secretly enjoyed the paper's militancy, nonetheless warned his pupil in Switzerland against permitting "an exaggerated rhetoric of violence." Bernstein's response once again illustrated his remarkable ability to consider the advice of his more experienced comrades: in typically straightforward fashion, he assumed full responsibility for the unfortunate episode, apologized, and emphasized his "willingness to correct his mistakes."³⁶ Despite the long and stressful period of severe criticism to which he and his paper were subjected by it, Bernstein appreciated the iron discipline of the labor movement, particularly its repeated refusal to give in to the temptation to break up into different political organizations: "To the honor of Hasenclever, I must sincerely attest that he has throughout stood up for the 'S[ozial]-D[emokrat]' – despite all our differences. The same goes for Grillenberger. Discipline is truly the strength of our party."³⁷ Little did Bernstein know that the apex of his battle with the SPD moderates was still ahead.

Late in 1884, the Imperial Government proposed a steamship subsidy bill that would grant German steamship lines a subsidy of 5.4 million marks for the creation and extension of existing routes to Africa, Australia, East Asia, and the South Sea Islands. A latecomer to the nineteenth-century European scramble for colonies, Germany obviously sought to catch up with France and England, and thus used public funds to support a big industry which was growing monopolistic in structure.³⁸ Disagreements in the SPD over support for protective tariffs were not new.

³⁴ For a detailed account of this dispute, see *EB*, pp. 25–34.

³⁵ Georg von Vollmar, *Reden und Schriften zur Sozialpolitik*, edited by Willy Albrecht (Berlin-Bonn: Dietz, 1977), p. 84.

³⁶ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 28.

³⁷ Bernstein to Engels (June 20, 1884), *Bernstein BWE*, p. 277.

³⁸ *DDS*, p. 55.

Moderates tended to argue that governmental subsidies for domestic industrial production were in the interest of the working class, since such subsidies led, in almost every case, to the creation of new industrial jobs. On the other side, radicals frequently refused to give blanket endorsement to such “job creation measures” without the inclusion of social demands like a reduction in work hours, higher safety standards, and standardized minimum wage laws. As Gary Steenson has pointed out, back in 1879 Engels had worked out a set of “guidelines for positive parliamentary behavior” which counselled the SPD Reichstag representatives to grant Bismarck nothing “which will increase the power of the government vis-à-vis the people.”³⁹

Obviously, a case could easily be made for the rejection of the proposed steamship subsidy bill, since it implicitly linked public funds to repressive colonial policies that not only failed to advance the power of the German people by one iota, but, through the method of indirect taxation, made “the workers carry the lion’s share of the subsidies.”⁴⁰ Yet SPD moderates used the nebulous argument of Germany’s alleged “duty” to “further world communication” to suggest the endorsement of the subsidy bill, with the exception of the portion that was earmarked for African ships. The radical minority faction led by Bebel and Liebknecht was vigorously opposed to all subsidies, contending that steamship subsidies could not be separated from imperialism and the undermining of world peace. While Bernstein openly sided with Bebel’s views, he made sure that the ensuing issues of *Der Sozialdemokrat* included articles and letters to the editor from both proponents and opponents of the bill.⁴¹

Still, most members of the moderate *Fraktion* felt that he had given more space to the radical perspective, and they issued an official declaration criticizing Bernstein’s editorial policy: “The paper does not determine the attitude of the parliamentary party, it is the parliamentary party which must control the attitude of the paper.”⁴² When Bernstein received this statement with the “order” to publish it without comment in the next issue, he bristled at the moderates’ complete disregard for his genuine attempts to permit a balanced discussion of the matter. In response, he refused to insert the statement in the paper and, citing the incident as a threat to his editorial independence, offered to resign on the spot.⁴³ Once again, his professional future in the labor movement hung in the balance.

Fortunately for Bernstein, the “General” stepped in and facilitated a

³⁹ Steenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ Bebel to Engels (December 28, 1884), *Bebel BWE*, p. 206.

⁴¹ *EB*, p. 36.

⁴² *DDS*, p. 55.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

compromise that ended the crisis and saved his pupil's job. Following Engels' advice, the *Fraktion* moderates agreed to offer amendments to the bill that would cut the subsidies to 3.7 million marks and explicitly link the release of the funds to their demands that all ships would have to be built in German shipyards. When the Reichstag Conservatives predictably rejected all socialist amendments, even the moderates were frustrated enough to vote unanimously against the bill. Although the act easily passed the final vote in parliament, the unified action of the SPD parliamentarians "officially" restored the peace within the party. Though Bernstein continued in his editorial position and could thus claim an important personal victory, some irritation between the two wings of German social democracy remained – a mutual sense of alienation that harkened back to the original opposition between the "Marxist" Eisenachers and the "Lassalleian" state socialists.⁴⁴

Bernstein unflinchingly continued to edit *Der Sozialdemokrat* along Marxist lines, often drawing the ire of the pro-German "Lassalleans" for his support of a "proletarian internationalism" over the chauvinistic conception of a "nationalist" socialism. Identifying capitalism as the major source for nationalism and war, Bernstein's paper consciously aimed at disseminating Marxist arguments among its socialist readership: "As long as the class state exists, there is no way to eliminate wars of nation against nation. Wherever we find economic exploitation, we find war – at home between the exploiters and the exploited and abroad among the exploiters' struggle over territories for exploitation."⁴⁵ Lassalleans demurred; the colonial expansion of the German Empire not only appealed to their nationalistic pride, but, as they saw it, it also contributed to the steady rise of the German worker's living standard.

As Henry Tudor has noted, it was perhaps the most complicated part of Bernstein's task as editor-in-chief to help win the arguments against the remaining Lassalleanism without jeopardizing party unity.⁴⁶ In this difficult enterprise, Bernstein's hand was significantly strengthened by Engels' advice and support. While the "General's" specific advice to the leaders of European labor movements sometimes fell on deaf ears, his unique position as the "legitimate voice of Marxist socialism" frequently gave him the necessary bully pulpit from which to preach the pursuit of a "Marxist politics." In fact, as the Conservative-dominated Reichstag kept renewing Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws, Engels came up with the ingenious "Marxist" suggestion that the party adopt a tactic of "intransigent opposition." Marrying revolutionary Marxist rhetoric with the

⁴⁴ *EB*, pp. 36–37.

⁴⁵ *Der Sozialdemokrat* (December 23, 1888).

⁴⁶ Tudor, "Introduction," in *MS*, p. 5.

“realistic” tactic of maintaining the “parliamentary road,” Engels pronounced that the party had the duty of actively participating in the parliamentary process in order to increase its strength and secure its survival. However, parliamentary activity should not be seen as an end in itself, but as an instrumental means within a long-term struggle that would “inevitably” culminate in revolution.⁴⁷ Confirmed in their cherished roles within parliamentarian “legality,” moderates were willing to pay lip service to the “revolutionary final goal,” and could even occasionally be counted on to support radical slogans directed against the “repressive enemies of the working class.”

But nobody grasped the propagandistic opportunities hidden in Engels’ “solution” better than August Bebel. Again and again, he encouraged Bernstein and his other literary comrades to show in their articles how existing repressive political conditions had in fact borne out the radical message of Marx and Engels. Raising Marxist principles to the status of “prophetic” pronouncements, Bebel promised workers that the time of their trials and tribulations was merely a necessary “overture” to a heroic future. Ultimately, the socialist opera would end triumphantly with the avenging angel of history brandishing his sword, clearing the stage for the final socialist goal – the revolutionary seizure of political power by the proletariat and the establishment of a just economic and social order. In particular, Bebel’s renewed sanguine predictions of an impending collapse of capitalist society – “at the latest in 1889” – gave his popular underground speeches the force of unshakable commandments.⁴⁸

Backed by their two powerful mentors, Bernstein and Kautsky gradually emerged as the leading theoretical voices of the SPD, their respective editorial activities proving instrumental in imparting orthodox Marxist theory to the young German labor movement. Yet, each man saw his role as Marxist theorist in a different light. As Gary Steenson emphasizes, Kautsky’s early role in the Austrian party was a model for all his later participation in various socialist organizations: he took no part in administration, and neither held nor ran for public or party offices, seeing himself exclusively as a propagandist, teacher, and very occasional speaker.⁴⁹ Thus, he viewed the socialist intellectual, first and foremost, as a Marxist popularizer and fierce guardian of “correct” Marxist theory. Striving to fulfill Engels’ ambitions to elevate Marxist doctrine as the only “genuine” *Weltanschauung* of the proletariat, Kautsky defined the paramount task of the Marxist theorist as that of keeping watch over the separation of “true” social theories from “false” ones.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁸ See Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, p. 38.

Consequently, Kautsky and his *Neue Zeit* concentrated on highlighting the *disparities* between the “scientific character of Marxism” and the ideological distortions of “bourgeois” social theory or other “non-scientific,” i.e., “non-Marxist” forms of socialism. Hoping to rid the party entirely of its remaining philosophical “eclecticism,” he preached the superiority of Marx’s method as a tool for analyzing society by focusing primarily on the development of the mode of production. Over and over again, Kautsky insisted on the importance of a “proletarian vantage point” which, by its very nature, could not tolerate “spurious compromises and syntheses” in the realm of theory: “The bridging and balancing of opposites – a significant task of practical politics – is the death of theory.”⁵⁰

At the same time, Kautsky legitimized the party’s gap between revolutionary theory and reformist practice – inherent in Engels’ tactics of “intransigent opposition” – by readily accepting the existence of crucial functional differences between socialist theorists and the *Praktiker* (“pragmatists”) of the labor movement. It is clear that Kautsky’s objective was to secure the intellectual autonomy of the former while leaving the latter sufficient latitude for shifting political tactics. Ultimately, the power of this conception was reflected in the realities of party life: the formation of an enduring “Kautsky–Bebel axis” around which most items of the SPD’s political and theoretical agenda would turn for almost two decades.

On the other hand, Bernstein’s conception of theoretical leadership differed in many important respects from Kautsky’s “evangelical” exercises aimed at “spreading the Marxist word to the masses.” Directing a primarily policy-oriented party organ, Bernstein was more interested in the difficult task of testing the applicability of socialist ideas in the complex realm of political and economic practice. Unlike Kautsky, who felt that the socialist intellectual’s talents were wasted on the “detail work of the day,”⁵¹ Bernstein enjoyed analyzing intricate policy questions from a Marxist point of view, and never sought to free the theorist from practical matters. He grew increasingly engaged in a struggle with what he saw as a widening of the theory–practice deficit in the SPD, hoping to provide both a “realistic” and a value-oriented framework for successful socialist action. Despite his genuine affection for Engels and the theoretical outlook he stood for, Bernstein’s understanding of the role of the socialist intellectual more closely approached the commonsensical convictions expressed in Liebknecht’s famous dictum: “I cherish Marx; still, party matters are paramount.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Karl Kautsky, “Der Parteitag in Lübeck,” in *NZ* 20.1 (1901–2), pp. 19–20.

⁵¹ Karl Kautsky, “Akademiker und Proletarier,” in *NZ* 19.2 (1900–1), pp. 90–91.

⁵² *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Erfurt vom 14–20 Oktober 1891* (Berlin, 1891), p. 327.

But Bernstein's apprenticeship years in his Swiss exile were not exclusively dedicated to matters of socialist politics. In 1887, in a quiet ceremony, he married Regine Zadek-Schattner, a widow with two young children. Superficial acquaintances of the Bernsteins, "Gine" Zadek's Berlin family was also Jewish and Polish in origin. Young Ede had been an occasional guest at the Zadek home in the early 1870s, when the quiet and well-educated Gine married Carl Schattner, a Serbian industrialist whose business failed a few years after the wedding. Given to alcohol abuse and occasional violent outbursts, Carl Schattner showed little interest in his two children and frequently mistreated his young wife. His sudden death almost came as a relief for Gine. Accompanied by her mother, son Ernst and daughter Käte, she moved to Switzerland, where she again met Eduard Bernstein. But unable to make ends meet, Gine and her children were forced to return to Berlin and move in with her brother, Ignaz Zadek, a successful medical doctor with strong sympathies for the labor movement. Aware that his friend had fallen in love with the young widow, Kautsky suggested that Bernstein invite her back to Zurich for an extended stay – a recommendation that ultimately led to Ede and Gine's marriage.⁵³

The couple's relationship was extremely close, and although they remained childless, Bernstein proved himself a kind stepfather, treating his wife's children as his own. Throughout the years, Ede remained extremely private about his family life, and even his very revealing autobiographical books deal only very sparingly with his marital relationship. In fact, his announcement of his impending wedding barely comprises two paragraphs. After reassuring Engels that Gine was a "good comrade willing to shoulder all obligations which my position imposes on me," Bernstein ended his brief note with a rather detached remark: "Well, that's off my chest, and now back to more general matters . . ."⁵⁴

Herself drawn to socialism, Gine was more than willing to share her husband's professional burden. She single-handedly translated Sidney and Beatrice Webb's voluminous *History of British Trade Unions* into German, with Ede supplying the introduction.⁵⁵ There is, however, no evidence to support the suggestion that Gine influenced her husband to break with orthodox Marxism.⁵⁶ Quite the contrary. She struck up a deep

⁵³ Florian Tennstedt, "Arbeiterbewegung und Familiengeschichte bei Eduard Bernstein und Ignaz Zadek," in *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 18.4 (1982), p. 474; and Eduard Bernstein, *Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre*, pp. 157–160.

⁵⁴ Bernstein cited in *DDS*, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Die Geschichte des Britischen Trade Unionismus*, translated by Regine Bernstein and introduced by Eduard Bernstein (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1895).

⁵⁶ See Angel, *Eduard Bernstein et L'Evolution du Socialisme Allemand*, p. 71.

friendship with the aging Engels, engaged him on political topics, and helped him carry out his personal errands, especially as his health began to fail. When Gine died in 1923, Bernstein fell into despair. Unable to overcome his loss, he retreated to his home and remained there for several months. Unwilling to receive visitors for a long time, he buried himself in work and became something of a social recluse.

Bernstein's political exile in Zurich also afforded him the opportunity of expanding his education beyond the immediate demands of his editorial position. He embarked on an intensive study of languages and European history, and within three years was able to speak and write fluently in Italian and French. By 1883, his French was so good, in fact, that Engels entrusted him with the German translation of *Misère de la Philosophie* – Marx's famous critique of Proudhon's decentralized, communal socialism. Upon moving to London, Bernstein immersed himself in the study of English, a language with which he grew so comfortable that he continued to correspond in it throughout his life. As Bernstein's intellectual horizons expanded and his journalistic experience grew, so did the circulation of *Der Sozialdemokrat*, already surpassing 10,000 in 1884. Evincing his enthusiasm for his protégé's editorial performance, Engels wrote to Bernstein approvingly: "I believe that a young man like you who has proven himself so brilliantly should continue at the job indefinitely."⁵⁷

Literary endeavors in England

With the socialist share of the 1887 Reichstag elections approaching 800,000 votes – 10 percent of the total and more than ever before – Chancellor Bismarck intensified his ongoing diplomatic interventions with Swiss authorities in favor of more stringent measures against the German socialist exiles. A year later, his efforts finally bore fruit. Bernstein, Motteler, and two other editorial staff members were charged with engaging in subversive political activities and were ordered to leave Switzerland within a few weeks. As they boarded their train at the Zurich station, the exiles were pleasantly surprised to see hundreds of well-wishers carrying proletarian banners, waving, and shouting "long live social democracy" and "see you again!"⁵⁸

At Engels' suggestion, Bernstein and his comrades moved to London, taking *Der Sozialdemokrat* with them. But with the unexpected lapse of the anti-socialist laws two years later, the "official" mission of the journal – protesting Bismarck's repressive measures – had come to an end. Almost overnight, Bernstein lost his influential job and was forced to supplement

⁵⁷ Engels to Bernstein (August 17, 1881) in *Bernstein BWE*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ *EB*, p. 43.

his reduced income by increasing his journalistic freelance activities. Once more the party proved kind to him, offering the position of London correspondent for both Kautsky's *Neue Zeit* and Liebknecht's Berlin-based party organ *Vorwärts*. To Bernstein's delight, his new activities did not nearly match up to his previous time-consuming editorial duties, allowing him to turn his attention to socialist theory and history. Following Engels' advice, he emulated Marx's daily routine, spending long days in the reading room of the British Museum collecting material for his first major historical work, *Cromwell and Communism*.⁵⁹ Utilizing historical materialism – Marx's method of analyzing social phenomena from the perspective of the forces and relations of production – Bernstein's book supplied the neglected economic dimension to the study of seventeenth-century British radicalism. Well researched and written in a smooth journalistic style, *Cromwell and Communism* achieved universal acclaim from his contemporary critics and developed over the decades into a "minor classic" of British social history.

The study was an impressive testimony to the beneficial effects of Bernstein's presence in London; not only did he gain access to a much greater body of scholarship than he could find in Zurich, but he also developed an even tighter working relationship with Engels. Engaging in long discussions that sometimes lasted into the early morning hours, Bernstein became the "General's" most trusted political confidant and personal friend. As a token of his growing appreciation, Engels even offered him the sole editorship of Marx's unfinished material, which was to be incorporated into volume IV of *Capital*. This clear sign of preferential treatment sorely upset Kautsky, who considered the theoretical expertise he had acquired as editor-in-chief of the party's most "academic" journal to be superior to that of his old friend Ede – a judgment Engels obviously did not share.⁶⁰

Good-natured as ever, and unwilling to risk his close friendship with Kautsky, Bernstein declined Engels' offer, turned the material over to Kautsky, and instead embarked on yet another major historical project: the study of Lassalle's life and social thought. After organizing Lassalle's writings into a new, more comprehensive edition, Bernstein published a detailed political biography of the legendary German working-class hero.⁶¹ The overall tone of the book was critical. While he lauded Lassalle's efforts to organize the proletariat as a political party and endow

⁵⁹ Eduard Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930).

⁶⁰ Bernstein to Kautsky (September 30, 1890), *Kautsky Archives*, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (IISH), DV131.

⁶¹ Eduard Bernstein, *Ferdinand Lassalle As a Social Reformer*, translated by Eleanor Marx Aveling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893).

it with its initial sense of its “great socialist ideals,” Bernstein went on to lambast most of Lassalle’s political and economic schemes, particularly his incipient nationalism and his reliance on strong state support for the creation of workers’ producer cooperatives.

Indeed, he most resented Lassalle’s “narcissistic grandiosity” and the “compulsive social climbing” which led the self-proclaimed “leader of the proletariat” to “flirt with the forces of reaction which he wanted to use to his advantage . . . instead of trusting the innate strength of the labor movement.”⁶² It should not come as a surprise that such passages aroused vehement protests from the remaining German Lassalleans. For them, Bernstein was engaged in an “unfair strategy” of connecting distinctive traits of Lassalle’s allegedly “flawed” personality to his “failed” political initiatives. Engels, however, applauded Bernstein’s efforts and did his best to shield his sensitive pupil from the contents of the numerous protest letters he received from German Lassalleans. Unfazed by the bombardment, the “General” told Bernstein to disregard his “misguided critics.” At the same time, he encouraged him to use the powerful “iron fist” of the critic encased in a “velvet glove,” in continuing to smash the popular “Lassalle Legend.”⁶³

The “New Course” in Germany

In 1890, only two years after Bernstein’s arrival in London, the political situation in Germany changed dramatically. The new Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed Chancellor Bismarck over their conflicting views on the government’s strategy *vis-à-vis* the recalcitrant social democrats. Having decided to follow the advice of his *Junker* counsellors under the leadership of the new Chancellor Leo von Caprivi, who favored a quick end to the politically effective “martyrdom” of the SPD, Wilhelm II let the anti-socialist laws lapse and inaugurated another era of social legislation in Germany. For example, the comprehensive 1891 Workers’ Protection Act reflected the more temperate “New Course of the Kaiser.”

Moderate social democrats immediately applauded his actions and demanded that the SPD leadership tone down its revolutionary message. Leading pragmatists like the Bavarian party leader Georg von Vollmar, Bruno Schönkank, Max Quark, and Eduard David implicitly questioned the class character of the party by suggesting to Bebel that their new status of “legality,” combined with “patience” and constant reformist pressure on the government, would eventually result in effective reforms benefiting

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶³ Engels cited in *EB*, p. 50.

all of German society.⁶⁴ Indeed, many *Praktiker* in the SPD openly revealed that they considered themselves “Marxists” only to the extent that they accepted the steady flow of communication between the party leadership and Engels in London. With the lapse of the Anti-Socialist Laws, they emphasized a reformist model of social transformation, and even proposed maintaining some form of “constructive interaction” with the government and bourgeois parties on particular issues.⁶⁵

Predictably, their vision of “reform socialism” encouraged a number of radical voices openly to question the wisdom of the “phoney” coexistence of revolutionary Marxist ideology and reformist political practice. Known as the “Youngsters,” these self-proclaimed “revolutionary Marxists” exercised considerable influence over a number of socialist newspapers, and fiercely attacked Bebel and the SPD leadership for not opposing the *Praktiker* more firmly. Calling the party’s parliamentarianism “despicable petty-bourgeois opportunism,”⁶⁶ the Youngsters faction resembled to some extent the British “Social Democratic Federation” (SDF) whose “Marxist” leaders combined their insurrectionary reading of *The Communist Manifesto* with incessant calls for “radical measures.”

As moderates began to strike back at the Youngsters, Bebel recognized the impending danger to party unity and turned to Engels for advice. After a short exchange of letters, both men reaffirmed their conviction that the post-1890 political situation in Germany demanded a change in agitational tactics without an abandonment of radical tenets. Engels continued to argue that the principles of representative democracy were only an intermediate step on the way toward the Marxist revolutionary “final goal.” However, the Kaiser’s “New Course” cried out for a fundamental re-evaluation of party tactics built on the old political realities of state oppression, marginalization, rigid opposition, and underground resistance. While both Engels and Bebel scorned the moderates’ call for absolute reformism, they agreed on a *temporary* strategy endorsing “gradualist” tactics. In their opinion, the rapid growth of the labor movement could only be maintained under conditions of legality and without launching radical provocations against the Kaiser’s government. Nothing would be more devastating for German social democracy than a new round of oppressive measures before the SPD was strong enough to muster a decisive revolutionary response.

⁶⁴ For a recent evaluation of the role of Bavarian socialist reformists and their leader, Georg von Vollmar, see Francis L. Carsten, “Georg von Vollmar: A Bavarian Social Democrat,” in *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990), pp. 317–335.

⁶⁵ Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen: Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie*, pp. 54–55.

⁶⁶ For a detailed summary of the Youngsters’ activities, see Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, pp. 19–34.

Reacting as a mere “tactician,” Engels repeatedly warned party radicals against premature forms of direct action. For example, pointing to the volatile political climate in Germany, he counselled against SPD-led demonstrations in celebration of “Labor Day.” In addition, he dismissed the Youngsters’ calls for a general strike on that day as “horrendous stupidity.”⁶⁷ Indeed, throughout the 1890s, Engels upheld, “for the time being,” “peacefulness, legality, and restraint.”⁶⁸ It is ironic that Engels, who had formulated the classical Marxist definition of “opportunism” and mercilessly exposed every kind of opportunism in the international labor movement, was prepared to “give the SPD enormous latitude in this regard – as long as it contributed to its smooth growth.”⁶⁹

Having found common ground on party tactics, Engels and Bebel pronounced their final “verdict” on the Youngsters’ rebellion. To the radicals’ great dismay, the co-author of *The Communist Manifesto* scornfully dismissed their proposals as “frantically distorting Marxism,” and blamed it on the “present rush of students and literary types into the party.”⁷⁰ While firing his verbal salvos against these “arrogant upstarts,” Engels did not hesitate to turn his fury against the moderates as well, calling them “petty bourgeois socialists” who would soon “bite the dust.”⁷¹ Leaning on Bebel’s ability to execute his proposals, Engels suggested drastic measures to keep the party from losing its ideological unity, and thus its political effectiveness: the anarchist leaders of the “Youngsters” were expelled, and leading *Praktiker* were pressured into renewing their token recognition of revolutionary Marxist principles.

In this spirit of “house-cleaning,” an enthusiastic Engels announced to Laura Marx-Lafargue that “February 20, 1890” was the “day of the beginning of the German revolution.”⁷² Polling almost 1.5 million votes out of 9.5 million in this triumphant election of 1890, German social democracy had finally made the transition from a small movement to a well-organized mass party – the second strongest in the Reich. Engels even went so far as to calculate with “mathematical certainty” the coming electoral victory of the SPD. In his opinion, a majority of the military’s personnel would vote social democratic by 1900, thus opening up the possibility of a quick and relatively bloodless takeover by the proletariat.⁷³

⁶⁷ Engels to Adolph Sorge (April 19, 1890), *MEW* 37, p. 395.

⁶⁸ *MEW* 37, pp. 366, 381.

⁶⁹ Hans-J. Steinberg, “Friedrich Engels’ revolutionäre Strategie nach dem Fall des Sozialistengesetzes,” in H. Pelger, ed. *Friedrich Engels 1820–1970* (Hannover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1971), p. 126.

⁷⁰ Engels to Otto von Bönigk (August 21, 1890), *MEW* 37, p. 444.

⁷¹ Engels to Kautsky (September 4, 1893), *MEW* 38, p. 448.

⁷² Engels to Laura Lafargue (February 26, 1890) in *MEW* 37, p. 359.

⁷³ Engels in *MEW* 22, p. 251.

While Bebel agreed with Engels' tactical moderation and shared his confidence in the ultimate victory of the proletariat, their overall conceptual blueprint of the coming socialist revolution differed significantly. Bebel expected the working class to take power after a general economic breakdown, thus in effect endorsing what Dieter Groh refers to as "revolutionary *attentisme*" – a combination of fatalism and formal radicalism.⁷⁴ In other words, the collapse of capitalism and revolution was an inevitable "natural process." In the meantime, the task of the party consisted in organizing the proletariat and preparing it for the decisive moment. Liebknecht shared neither Engels' nor Bebel's ideas: he identified as the goal of the SPD's gradualism the assumption of an absolute majority in parliament, and the subsequent *hineinwachsen* ("growing into") of the current society into socialism. It was this vaguely expressed conception of an "evolutionary socialism" which Bernstein would ultimately supply with a more sophisticated theoretical foundation. Yet, these incompatible assumptions regarding the party's "gradualism" go to show that while Engels, Bebel, Liebknecht, and even the moderates agreed on peaceful party *tactics*, each clearly subscribed to different conceptual models of what a "socialist transformation of society" in the German context really meant.

But in the early 1890s, these diverging theoretical visions signified very little. The party continued engaging in the "reformist" practice of pursuing immediate improvements of workers' conditions, which sometimes involved informal "deals" and compromises with bourgeois parties and the Kaiser's authoritarian government. In fact, party secretary Ignaz Auer later claimed that even from the time of its inception, the German social democracy stood for a thorough reformism, for "How could it be otherwise for a party that counts on mass support?"⁷⁵ Though ingenious in its theoretical design, Engels' strategy of endorsing "short-term" reformist tactics that were not at odds with a revolutionary "final goal" merely postponed the emergence of voices critical of this widening chasm between theory and practice. Future "revisionists" like Bernstein would eventually ask the crucial question: if Marxist theory depended on practice and *vice versa*, and if the military did not overwhelmingly support social democracy by the turn of the century, didn't Engels' endorsement of legality and electoral concerns ultimately *have to* translate into a "revision" of theory as well?

Already a year later, the rupture between theory and practice became painfully obvious when the SPD leadership decided to draft the new 1891

⁷⁴ Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt: Propyläen, 1973).

⁷⁵ Auer cited in Bernstein, *Ignaz Auer*, p. 63.

Erfurt Party Program. In addition, the events leading up to the adoption of the new program significantly changed the existing power relations within the SPD. Determined to purge social democracy of its last Lassallean remnants, Engels, against the wishes expressed in Marx's last will and testament, resolved to publish the latter's private notes criticizing the party's 1875 Gotha Program. Engels' surprising initiative, undertaken without informing the party leadership, had two important objectives. First, in line with Bernstein's literary efforts, he sought to shatter the persistent "Lassalle Legend." Engels hoped that the publication of Marx's private opinions would help to reveal a historical truth: the existence of "deep antagonisms between Marx and Lassalle."⁷⁶

But Engels' calculated manoeuvre had a second target: Wilhelm Liebknecht. Realizing that his aging comrade's intellectual ability to spread Marx's gospel to a new generation of workers had reached its limits, the "General" wanted to see him replaced by two more sophisticated Marxist theorists, namely Kautsky and Bernstein. Engels knew only too well that Marx's marginal notes would reveal not only the latter's disapproval of Lassallean ideas but also his low esteem for Liebknecht, the theoretical "architect" of the "eclectic" 1875 Gotha Program. Hence, he was ready to weather the unpleasant storm of party criticism hurled at him for his indiscretion.

Engels' plan worked to perfection. Once the initial wave of outrage had passed, Engels' scheme succeeded in producing the desired effects. While the SPD leadership officially commissioned Liebknecht with drawing up the new program, Bebel's confidence in his old comrade-in-arms waned quickly in the light of Engels' revelations.⁷⁷ When Liebknecht's internal draft was made accessible for review to leaders of both the social democratic parliamentary faction and local party chapters, Bebel eagerly joined the growing chorus of its critics, allowing Kautsky to launch an all-out assault on Liebknecht's version. In fact, Kautsky's alternative proposal, based on the 1880 French "Minimalist Program" drafted by Marx and two leading French socialists, soon emerged as the leading draft proposal.

Readily agreeing to minor changes suggested by Bebel, Kautsky managed to gather the entire political weight of the powerful party leader behind his proposal. The "hands-on politician" (Bebel) and the "Marxist ideologist" (Kautsky) had coordinated their mutually beneficial career

⁷⁶ *Engels BWK*, pp. 282, 283.

⁷⁷ The belated publication also revealed that Liebknecht had managed to hide from Bebel Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which he had sent to the party leadership. Had Bebel read Marx's remarks, he probably would not have given his approval to Liebknecht's draft.

interests, a phenomenon that was to leave its indelible mark on the history of German social democracy. With Kautsky on board, Bebel was even strong enough to send the “General” a clear sign of his independent political leadership. Warning against the dangerous political consequences of incorporating Engels’ radical-democratic demands for “the concentration of all political power in the hands of a people’s representative body,”⁷⁸ Bebel instead suggested a reformulation of this passage that would blunt its radical edge. Against Engels’ protest, the party leadership overwhelmingly adopted Bebel’s motion. Having reached the zenith of his power, Bebel could now afford to soothe Engels’ anger by recommending that Kautsky write the standard commentary to the new program. Despite Bebel’s show of force, Engels’ plan had worked: Lassallean phrases were omitted, Liebknecht had been demoted, and his pupil Kautsky had been installed as the “official” party theorist in Germany.

As adopted, the 1891 Erfurt Program consisted of two major parts: a “theoretical-Marxist” portion based on Kautsky’s amended proposal; and a “practical part,” drafted jointly by Bernstein and Engels. The theoretical portion enshrined the Marxist doctrine of class struggle with its “inevitable” socialist *telos*. Time was on the side of the proletariat, for as capitalist society moved ever closer to its revolutionary demise, the “final goal” of social democracy would take shape in the “transformation of capitalist private ownership of the means of production into social ownership, and the transformation of the commodity production into one for and by society – a socialist form of production.” Hence, the task of the party was defined as “enlightening the proletariat about both its historical role in the revolutionary class struggle” and its “inevitable goal.”⁷⁹

Bearing the fingerprints of Bernstein, the “practical” part of the Erfurt Program represented a “social democratic program of action,” and consisted of concrete demands like reform of discriminatory electoral laws, the establishment of popular self-government, education, and social policy.⁸⁰ Calling for both the extension of political democracy and the implementation of fair labor laws, Bernstein’s rather moderate portion of the Erfurt Program stood in marked contrast to the radical language of its “theoretical” part. Reflecting Engels’ solution of endorsing tactical reformism “on the way” to revolution, the document did little to bridge the party’s growing gap between radical theory and gradualist practice. Thus, German social democracy missed an early historical chance to remedy this ultimately fatal dualism.

⁷⁸ *MEW* 22, p. 235.

⁷⁹ *Karl Kautsky, Das Erfurter Programm*, 20th ed. (Berlin: Dietz, 1980), pp. 106, 125–127, 129–140, 222–223.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 255–258.

In the end, Engels revealed that his overall concerns with the program's "Marxist character" outweighed his political instincts. Still, there is evidence that he remained aware of the potential harm that the widening theory–practice gap could do to the future unity of the labor movement.⁸¹ While invoking a spurious ideological unity in the name of "Marxism," the incompatibility of the Erfurt Program's two main portions nonetheless signalled a renewal of the 1875 Gotha compromise between radical theory and reformist practice within the authoritarian political framework of Wilhelmine Germany. But it also gave expression to the party's growing theoretical fatigue and its lack of critical self-reflection. These ominous developments increasingly impacted Bernstein's intellectual evolvment, providing the context of his emerging quest for "evolutionary socialism."

⁸¹ Engels in *MEW* 38, p. 183.

3 The “Revisionist Controversy”

Catching the “British disease”

Bernstein spent the exciting months leading from the lapse of the anti-socialist laws to the drafting of the Erfurt Party Program at Engels’ side in London. In retrospect, it is impossible to say whether Bernstein unconsciously translated his mentor’s purely *tactical* support of parliamentary elections and the “peaceful” transformation of capitalist society into an endorsement of “evolutionism” *in principle*. A series of articles in *Der Sozialdemokrat*, entitled “*Klippen*” (“cliffs”), written under his pseudonym “Leo” in the spring of 1890, illustrates Bernstein’s ambiguity on this point.¹ On one hand, he emphasized the heightened parliamentary responsibility of the SPD as a result of the elections, while on the other, he explicitly reaffirmed the party’s commitment to revolution, warning against the possible degeneration of reformism into “parliamentary cretinism.”²

Throughout this hectic period, however, Bernstein never neglected his burgeoning contacts in various branches of the British labor movement. Moreover, as his scholarship on seventeenth-century British radicalism grew in stature, so did his emotional connection to his adopted country. Overcoming initial cultural and linguistic barriers, his political outlook became increasingly “British” in its admiration for England’s basic liberties, its parliamentarianism, and its inclination toward piecemeal social reformism. Bernstein’s growing “anglophilia” raises a question frequently asked by historians of socialist thought: what is the extent of British political influence on the genesis of his revisionism? A number of Bernstein scholars have argued that it was the impact of the Fabian socialists that ultimately opened the way to his revisionist *Wende* (“turn”).³

¹ Leo (Bernstein), “Klippen,” *Der Sozialdemokrat* (April 12, 1890; May 3 and 24, 1890).

² See Henry Tudor, “Introduction,” in *MS*, p. 7.

³ See, for example, DDS; Hirsch, *Der “Fabier” Eduard Bernstein*; Frei, *Fabianismus und Bernstein’scher Revisionismus 1884–1900*.

At first glance, it indeed appears that Bernstein's revisionism heavily relied on Sidney Webb's organicist and scientific claims regarding the importance of "objective social criteria" that allowed for a prescriptive science of politics.⁴ Largely a middle-class movement of socialist intellectuals, the Fabians, too, argued for a democratic, "evolutionary" reconstruction of society on the basis of universalist, ethical imperatives. Bernstein, however, vehemently denied strong Fabian influences on his political thought. While conceding the favorable impression made on him by Fabians like the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw, and even admitting on occasion that their evolutionary model had "expanded his theoretical horizon," he nonetheless insisted that Fabian arguments did not serve as the main intellectual source of his own "revisionist" enterprise.⁵ As he was known for always scrupulously acknowledging his theoretical influences, Bernstein's claim ought to be taken seriously. Moreover, there is indeed some evidence for his assertion: as late as 1896, he assailed the "confused nature of Fabian eclecticism," criticizing Fabian utilitarian, visionless pragmatism for its lack of core principles.⁶ In fact, the Fabian tendency toward atheoretical instrumentalism and administrative bureaucratism forced the German exile to explore in more detail the inherent tension in reformism between ethical ideals and political expedience.⁷ Granting Bernstein some theoretical detachment from Fabianism, the fact remains that he openly admired Sidney Webb's intellectual stature and his almost encyclopedic memory. On several occasions, he praised Webb's remarkable talents in parrying the sometimes openly hostile questions posed by his learned lecture audience.⁸ Bernstein himself was a regular lecturer at meetings of the Fabian society, and he occasionally dined at the homes of the Webbs, George Bernard Shaw, and Edward Pease. So, undoubtedly, *some* "Fabianism" must have rubbed off on him.

But even if we concede that Bernstein was not a fully fledged "Fabian convert," what about the claim that he spoke with the eclectic voice of a Benthamite Philosophic Radical?⁹ There is no doubt that his later views on foreign policy and internationalism resembled the ethical and political positions held by British Radicals like Richard Cobden, the early apostle of

⁴ C. E. Hill, "Sidney Webb and the Common Good: 1887-1889," in *History of Political Thought* 14.4 (Winter 1993), pp. 593-594.

⁵ Eduard Bernstein, "Zur Geschichte des Revisionismus," n. d., in *Bernstein A*, A43.

⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "General Observations on Utopianism and Eclecticism," *MS*, p. 77.

⁷ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, pp. 274-276.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁹ Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, p. 184; "British Radicalism and German Revisionism: The Case of Eduard Bernstein," in *The International History Review* 4.3 (1982), pp. 339-370; and Markku Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Kolonialpolitik: Eduard Bernsteins Stellung zur Kolonialpolitik und zum Imperialismus 1882-1914* (Helsinki: SHS, 1986).

Free Trade and founder of the Anti-Corn Law League.¹⁰ Bernstein, who could never quite warm up to the ascetic Fabian conception of a Puritan socialism built mainly on administrative efficiency and sound bookkeeping, may have aligned himself instead with the refined aestheticism of the Philosophic Radicals – a clear departure from Beatrice Webb's puritan suspicion of the pleasures of material consumption and high culture.

But the intellectual influences on Bernstein during his London exile were not confined to the principles of Philosophic Radicalism alone. Wide-ranging in his tastes, he read any radical pamphlet he could lay his hands on, and frequently attended the political speeches of British trade union leaders, atheistic free-thinkers, and Christian socialists,¹¹ thus absorbing many features of the British "Common Weal" tradition derived from Coleridge, Owen, Kingsley, Ruskin, and J. S. Mill.¹² Bernstein also made the acquaintance of renowned poet and Socialist Leaguer, William Morris (who, in 1883, had published his best-selling utopian novel, *News From Nowhere*), and struck a lasting friendship with the Laborite Ramsay MacDonald, the future British prime minister. Indeed, at the 1893 Bradford Founding Conference of MacDonald's Independent Labour Party, organized with the help of Keir Hardie, Bernstein was a noted guest-of-honor.

In sum, then, establishing a single, definite link between Bernstein's later revisionism and a distinct intellectual source within Britain's radical tradition would appear to be an impossible enterprise. Suffice it to say that he did catch the "British disease," and hence, to some extent, absorbed the left-liberal "virus." As will be shown below, many features of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism were nourished by the same all-embracing scientific and ethical Victorian evolutionary intellectual climate that in the last years of the century gave birth to the "New Liberalism" of progressive political thinkers like L. T. Hobhouse and J. A. Hobson. Indeed, Bernstein became a personal friend of H. W. Massingham and other prominent members of the New Liberal "Rainbow Circle,"¹³ and he frequently contributed articles to the group's literary outgrowths, the *Progressive Review* and *The Nation*.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Roger Fletcher, "Cobden as Educator: The Free-Trade Internationalism of Eduard Bernstein," in *The American Historical Review* 83 (1983), pp. 561–578; "Bernstein in Britain: Revisionism and Foreign Affairs," in *The International History Review* 1 (1979), pp. 349–375; and "British Radicalism and German Revisionism: The Case of Eduard Bernstein," in *The International History Review* 4 (1982), pp. 339–370.

¹¹ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, pp. 230–249.

¹² See Peter Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹³ Later, Bernstein personally revised and prefaced the German edition of Wallas' *Human Nature in Politics*. See Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), p. 152.

¹⁴ David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals, and the Quest for Unity, 1884–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 58.

It was the combination of Bernstein's tight progressive network of social acquaintances, his regular visits to left-liberal societies like the national liberal club, and his long discussions with a variety of "social reformers" that facilitated the reawakening of the old liberal ideals of his youth.¹⁵ The evolutionary language of ethical perfectability and rational self-control of late-Victorian liberalism became the much-cherished standard for his own cultural and social values. He began to speak favorably of the "urbane tone of British literature" with its air of cultural superiority, its dry humor, and its Humean fondness for the proper "refinement of tastes."¹⁶ At the same time, Bernstein appreciated that the English language had remained "far more colloquial than German," allowing for a "directness and natural power of expression the want of which is often felt in German."¹⁷ Identifying with Britain's long political tradition of free expression and public agitation, Bernstein admired the diversity of opinions expressed in British periodicals and journals.

Most of all, however, he noted the social achievements made possible by the English workers' practical, utilitarian point of view.¹⁸ He spoke in glowing terms of the good relationship between British labor leaders and representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie, arguing that "such a marriage of convenience" had contributed to the success of English piecemeal reformism.¹⁹ For Bernstein, the evolving British model proved the possibility of mutually agreeable pacts between capital and labor, inspiring him to communicate his observations to his German party comrades.

Nonetheless, interpretations of Bernstein's *Wende* as a wholesale "product of his British exile," push too far.²⁰ Rather than "turning him into a British liberal," Bernstein's twelve years of British exile helped him to perceive the possible theoretical compatibility of a left-liberalism and (Marxist) socialist conceptions, and thereby prompted the start of his lifelong quest for the realization of an evolutionary socialism—in *Germany*. Even years after his arrival in London, he confided to Engels that his greatest wish remained an eventual return to his home country, for "working abroad" ultimately remained for him "an aimless enterprise."²¹

Indeed, not everything British turned out to be pleasant for Bernstein. Soon after his arrival in England, he found his articles attacked by Henry Hyndman and Ernest Belfort Bax of the dogmatic Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Both "Marxists" had previously provoked a number

¹⁵ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, pp. 253–254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 276–278.

¹⁹ See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, "Briefe aus England," in NZ 9 (1890/91), p. 25.

²⁰ See, for example, Luxemburg, *Reform and Revolution*; and Hirsch, *Der "Fabier" Eduard Bernstein*.

²¹ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 64.

of nasty clashes with the founders of scientific socialism themselves. Bax, who eventually emerged as the first outspoken critic of Bernstein's "revisionist" views, was an eccentric personality even by British standards. An outspoken atheist and wild-eyed republican, he had adopted the French revolutionary hero Marat as his romantic patron saint in his declared mission of bringing "real socialism" to England. Taking delight in controversial debates that frequently ended in shouting matches, and never embarrassed about contradicting his previous arguments, Bax enjoyed antagonizing his "radical" company. For example, he deliberately touched off a lengthy discussion in left circles on the question of the status of women in British society. Arguing that in England "men actually constitute the downtrodden sex," Bax objected fiercely to the pro-feminist legislative proposals of his leftist friends.²² No surprise, then, that his social romanticism clashed with Bernstein's empiricist progressivism, often culminating in Bax's acerbic attacks on the German exile's "dried-up" and "soulless" socialism.

As the members of Britain's "official Marxist party" continued their verbal broadsides against the new exile, both Engels and Kautsky encouraged Bernstein to strike back. Seemingly rattled by events, and severely overworked, Bernstein suffered a nervous breakdown that interrupted his daily routine for months. Increasingly aware that the vulgar-Marxist slogans of the SDF resembled those of the SPD, his anger at such "misrepresentations of Marxist theory" gave way to a general uneasiness about some Marxist principles. Slowly, he began to retreat behind a stone wall of skepticism. More and more, Bernstein's letters and articles came to reflect his displeasure with "certain formulas of dogmatic Marxists."²³

Engels quickly discovered his protégé's growing liberal sympathies, intimating to Kautsky that Bernstein seemed to have lost his fine political instincts and was becoming increasingly "academic" in his approach.²⁴ In a letter to Bebel, the "General" complained that Ede sometimes displayed "the manner of a small shopkeeper . . . At times, I think the old Aaron [Bernstein's liberal uncle] is standing in front of me."²⁵ Still, despite his students' lingering "pessimism," Engels continued to insist that there was no need to worry about Bernstein's apparent seduction by liberal and Fabian ideas. On several occasions, Engels reassured his German comrades that the situation was definitely "manageable."²⁶

²² Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*.

²³ Bernstein to Kautsky (June 26, 1891), cited in Steinberg, "Herausbildung des Revisionismus von Eduard Bernstein," in Horst Heimann and Thomas Meyer, eds. *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus* (Berlin, Bonn: Dietz, 1978), p. 44.

²⁴ Engels to Kautsky (November 3, 1893), *MEW* 39, p. 161.

²⁵ Engels to Bebel (October 12, 1893), *Bebel BWE*, p. 718.

²⁶ Bernstein to Kautsky, (November 9, 1898), *Adler A*. See also, *PS*, p. 7.

In fact, all of Bernstein's major studies written during this period found Engels' lavish praise and full approval.²⁷ Even in 1894, when Engels privately called Bernstein's critical review of Marx's posthumously published volume III of *Capital* "highly confused," he never attacked his pupil in public. Bernstein remained a regular at Engels' private Sunday night social gatherings which allowed him to engage in a series of political debates with Engels' many progressive guests. It was a time when Bernstein could rub shoulders with a whole range of thinkers along the political spectrum, from democratic republicans like Eugen Oswald to Marx's shady son-in-law Edward Aveling, and Charles Kingsley, the English "Father of Christian Socialism." These conversations, occurring under Engels' watchful eye, proved to be immensely important for developing Bernstein's increasingly critical socialist theory.²⁸

Engels' unwavering confidence in his Berliner friend remained firm to the last; this was reflected by his will, in which he appointed Bernstein and Bebel as joint executors of his literary estate. On August 27, 1895, seventeen days after Engels' secular funeral, Bernstein, accompanied by Marx's daughter Eleanor and other close friends of the extended "family," committed his ashes to the ocean waves offshore of Eastbourne.²⁹ Engels' death left the German labor movement without a single authoritative voice in theoretical matters – a dire predicament accurately captured by SPD party secretary Ignaz Auer: "The Old Man is irreplaceable in questions of scriptural interpretation. With all due respect for the younger Church Fathers, the rich experience and authority of Engels is absent . . . Accordingly, we'll have to do without a 'Source of Truth' for a while, which may turn out to be a quite unpleasant experience."³⁰ Auer's fears were borne out within only three years.

First revisionist stirrings

Although, by the middle of the 1890s, "Marxism" and "socialism" had indeed become synonymous in the minds of most people, the political practice of the German labor movement continued in almost anti-Marxist fashion. In contrast to Marxist theory, the day-to-day business of the political parties of the working class and its rapidly growing trade unions consisted of making small, gradual steps toward wresting political rights

²⁷ See, for example, Engels' praise of Bernstein's Lassalle biography, *MEW* 38, pp. 170, 235.

²⁸ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, pp. 193–220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁰ *Adler BW*, pp. 189–190.

from the hands of the German “autocratic, half-absolutist, pseudo-constitutional state,”³¹ relying on reformist measures aimed at a gradual transformation of bourgeois society through the ballot box. Ordinary labor activists found themselves pursuing very concrete and immediate ends, such as fighting restrictive electoral laws, demanding increased pay, calling for a shorter working day, and lobbying for more democratic factory laws.

The Marxist leaders of social democracy followed Bebel’s tactic of revolutionary *attentisme*, yet showed no intention of replacing Marxist ideology with a liberal-democratic theory more closely aligned with reformist practice. Realizing the tactical and pedagogical power inherent in Marx’s apocalyptic vision, even reform-minded party *Praktiker* often turned a blind eye to the vast gap separating revolutionary Marxist theory and reformist practice – just as orthodox theorists tended to downplay the fundamentally reformist character of the movement. Never mind that Marxism’s pessimistic assessment of capitalist development no longer corresponded to the new economic and political conditions of *fin-de-siècle* Europe. As long as Marxist teleology contributed to labor unity and the political effectiveness of the working class, neither radical nor moderate party leaders so much as blinked. As Hans-Ulrich Wehler has noted, this SPD tactic of revolutionary *attentisme* contributed indirectly to the stabilisation of the German political and social system as a whole.³²

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, the uneasiness of some European socialists with the widening theory–practice gap began to be translated into concrete attacks against Marxist theory. In Germany, emboldened by the party’s stronger tactical emphasis on “*Praxis*,” dissenters soon found public outlets for questioning the value of “theory” in general. At the 1895 Breslau Party Congress, Georg von Vollmar openly favored “practical agitation” at the expense of “excessive dealings with matters of gray theory.” In addition, by interpreting Engels’ short-term tactics of operating within the existing parliamentary parameters of the Wilhelmine Empire as a “proven” *long-term* socialist strategy, the *Praktiker* were calling into question the very nature of the labor movement itself. Was the SPD still an exclusive class party, as Karl Kautsky and other orthodox Marxists claimed? Or, given the iron logic of electoral competition, should social democracy actively search for contact with, and reach out to non-proletarian classes like, the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie?

Bernstein increasingly recognized the significance of these questions,

³¹ Wehler, *The German Empire*, p. 52.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

and began moving slowly toward a "reformist" answer. During the 1893 Prussian state elections, for example, he criticized the party's decision to boycott elections held under the discriminatory Prussian three-class franchise. Arguing that limited electoral alliances with the liberals would help the party to gain additional seats in the state parliament, Bernstein felt that Bebel's intransigence on this issue only made sense in situations where nothing could be gained from a compromise.³³ For the first time, he explicitly questioned Bebel's strategy of revolutionary *attentisme* – the celebrated retreat into political isolation and the fatalistic awaiting of the capitalist breakdown. Such expectations, he warned, might prevent the party from "doing whatever is necessary to foster the interest of the working class."³⁴ On the other hand, as Bernstein himself clearly realized, forging alliances for purely instrumental reasons could turn parliamentarianism from a means to an end into "an end in itself."³⁵ In other words, Bernstein's occasional "compromise" might turn into an established "policy of compromise," with electoral instrumentalism habitually overriding socialist principles. Caught between the Scylla of isolation and political ineffectiveness and the Charybdis of reformist instrumentalism, Bernstein found himself face to face with the major obstacle to any workable version of evolutionary socialism.

The Bavarian reformist Georg von Vollmar saw the class issue in a more clear-cut fashion. Challenging the basic Marxist assumptions of party leader August Bebel, who delighted in referring to bourgeois society and its political order as the "deadly enemy of social democracy,"³⁶ *Praktiker* clearly favored the transformation of the SPD's circumscribed status as a "class party" into a more inclusive "people's party." Moreover, they expressed their impatience with "old revolutionary slogans" that, in their opinion, stifled the further growth of the party. In unequivocal terms, the reformists demanded a thorough "revision" of the "outdated" theoretical part of the 1891 Erfurt Program.

Retreating into his "proletarian standpoint," Kautsky sniped at Vollmar's "opportunist tactics" and categorically rejected any attempts to "turn German social democracy from a party of the fighting proletariat into an eclectic swamp of frustrated fellows."³⁷ Still in the minority, outspoken *Praktiker* like Breslau Reichstag representative Bruno Schön-lank nonetheless served the party leadership with a stern warning: "The

³³ See Henry Tudor, "Introduction," in *MS*, pp. 8–9.

³⁴ Bernstein cited in *ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁵ Eduard Bernstein, "Die preussischen Landtagswahlen und die Sozialdemokratie," in *NZ* 11.2 (1893), p. 777.

³⁶ Bebel cited in Carsten, *August Bebel und die Organisation der Massen*, p. 189.

³⁷ Karl Kautsky, "Die Breslauer Resolution und ihre Kritik," *NZ* 14.1 (1895/96), p. 186.

revision of our old conceptions [of socialism] continues inexorably; the dogged fanaticism of our party dogmatists will soon crumble.”³⁸ Bernstein’s own critique of Marxist orthodoxy was undoubtedly influenced by the *Praktiker*’s arguments, which, he believed, reflected the legitimate demand for a “modernization” of Marxist theory. Hence, while the accelerated speed of industrialization in Germany represented a powerful force in the final emergence of Marxist “revisionism,” it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of political ideas on the development of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism.³⁹

Besides its debt to British progressivism, Bernstein’s liberal socialism owed much to the German neo-Kantian tradition of Friedrich Albert Lange, and to both French and Italian ethical socialism.⁴⁰ Ultimately, however, it was the powerful combination of Bernstein’s broadminded character and his prominent position within the SPD party hierarchy that made his revisionist critique more successful than any other previous attempt. Representing the much admired model of German social democracy, Bernstein and his renowned stature as a major socialist thinker provided other European “revisionists” with the necessary legitimation for branching out into what was to become an amazing variety of autonomous and semi-independent “revisionist schools.”

The critique of socialist reason

Almost thirty years after the outbreak of the “Revisionist Controversy” in the SPD, Bernstein remarked that the seeds of his theoretical intervention were sown as early as 1891.⁴¹ Hence, it is entirely useless to search in Bernstein’s writings for the one document that might be considered the “birth certificate of revisionism.”⁴² Rather, Bernstein arrived at his new position only gradually, in the course of several years.⁴³ Indeed, he did not realize the full extent of his changed perspective until early 1897, when, during a lecture to the Fabian society entitled “What Marx Really

³⁸ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Frankfurt vom 21–27 Oktober 1894* (Berlin, 1894), p. 152.

³⁹ A recent structuralist argument for the emergence of Bernstein’s revisionism has been advanced by Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Kolonialpolitik*, pp. 190–195. However, as pointed out by Woodruff D. Smith’s review of Hyrkkänen’s study (1988), limiting Bernstein’s theory to purely “objective social forces” misses the impact of particular ideas and thinkers on Bernstein’s thought (*American Historical Review* 93.4, p. 1,071).

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive “influence analysis” of Bernstein’s political thought, see Gustafsson, *Marxismus und Revisionismus*.

⁴¹ *ES*, p. 20.

⁴² Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky*, p. 292; and Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen*, pp. 120–121.

⁴³ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) in *MS*, p. 325.

Taught," he saw that he could no longer accept certain Marxist principles:

I told myself secretly that this could not go on. It is idle to attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. The vital thing is to be clear as to where Marx is still right and where he is not. If we jettison the latter, we serve Marx's memory better than when (as I did and as many still do) we stretch his theory until it will prove anything. Because then it proves nothing.⁴⁴

Between 1890 and 1891, Bernstein reviewed a number of new studies on political economy for *Neue Zeit*, including Gerhard von Schulze-Gävernitz's *On Social Peace*, and Julius Wolf's *Socialism and the Capitalist Economic Order*. Both books focused on the likely course of future economic development and severely criticized the Marxist "theory of breakdown" – the conception that inherent contradictions at the economic base would inevitably lead to ever-widening economic crises culminating in a general collapse of capitalist society. Although his review skillfully employed Marx's method to modify Wolf and von Gävernitz's analysis, Bernstein secretly came to agree with the general drift of their arguments.⁴⁵

A year later, Bernstein turned his attention to the writings of the neo-Kantian socialist philosopher F. A. Lange, the radical-liberal hero of his ex-employer Höchberg. Impressed with the logic of its Kantian ethics and pleasantly surprised by its author's familiarity with J. S. Mill and the British liberal tradition, Bernstein approved of Lange's important 1865 study, *The Labor Question*. Calling it a "progressive program of action which has removed Lassalle's ambiguities,"⁴⁶ Bernstein's overall favorable analysis of Lange's social theory resulted in a lengthy three-part article in *Neue Zeit*, entitled "In Honor of Friedrich Albert Lange."⁴⁷ Lauding the Duisburg scholar for both his theoretical sophistication and his role as mediator between progressive parts of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Bernstein was unaware that he would soon share Lange's desire to link liberalism and socialism.⁴⁸ He also came to adopt Lange's critical stance toward G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of "dialectical

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* For a translation of this essay, see H. Kendall Rogers, "Eduard Bernstein Speaks to the Fabians: A Turning-Point in Social Democratic Thought?," in *International Review of Social History* 28 (1983), pp. 320-338.

⁴⁵ *ES*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "Zur Würdigung Friedrich Albert Langes," in *NZ* 10.2 (1892), p. 108.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-78, 101-109, 132-141. Bernstein's renewed interest in Lange was sparked in early 1892, while reading Lange's major works in the British Museum. He also wrote a review of O. A. Ellisen's Lange biography, *Friedrich Albert Lange. Eine Lebensbeschreibung* (Leipzig, 1891).

⁴⁸ In the wake of the 1866 Prussian victory over Austria, the frustrated Lange left German labor politics and accepted a chair in philosophy at Zurich University.

pitfalls,” expressing for the first time in public his Lange-influenced methodological doubts about Marxist doctrine. In particular, Bernstein began to share Lange’s conviction that Marxism could not lay *a priori* claims to absolute “truths,” since, as a science, it was inherently open to future refutations by the new findings of scientific enquiries.⁴⁹ Finally, the 1894 posthumous publication of the disappointing volume III of Marx’s *Capital* also seemed to support Lange’s earlier warning that actual social development never proceeded with the “same precision and symmetry as it does in speculative construction.”⁵⁰ The negative reactions to volume III of *Capital* by outstanding political economists from both within and without social democracy enhanced Bernstein’s own suspicion that Marx, in typically Hegelian “dialectical fashion,” had engaged in a “conceptual stretching” of his main categories in order to correct obvious theoretical problems in his labor theory of value.

And there was yet another important indication of existing holes in Marx’s theory. The cumulative effects of the end of the long economic stagnation in Germany and the implementation of the government’s social policies showed positive effects on the living standard of the working class.⁵¹ Moreover, between 1882 and 1895 alone, the German industrial working class had grown by almost two million. Much faster than its European neighbors, the German Empire had become an industrialized country, soon surpassing the coal and steel production of its closest rivals, France and Britain.⁵² The rapid economic development in Germany seemed to bolster what Bernstein had observed in England on a daily basis: industrialization breeds political and economic reformism, which, in turn, strengthens the expansion of democratic rights and weakens old, class-based privileges. Relating the path of industrializing countries to a general “evolutionary progress,” Bernstein felt that the revolutionary road of 1789 and 1848 had ceased to be a realistic option. The strong anti-insurrectionary language of his 1895 afterword to Louis Heretier’s *History of the 1848 French Revolution*,⁵³ and his 1897 review article on Scipio Sighele’s *Crowd Psychology and Mass Crime*, show that he began to doubt the applicability of early nineteenth-century revolutionary principles to *fin-de-siècle* social conditions.

The repeated warnings of his late friend and mentor, Karl Höchberg,

⁴⁹ Eduard Bernstein, “Zum zehnjährigen Bestand der Neuen Zeit,” in *NZ* 11.1 (1892/93), p. 10.

⁵⁰ *PS*, p. 31.

⁵¹ Georg Fülberth, “Zur Genese des Revisionismus in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie vor 1914,” in *Das Argument* 13.1-2 (March 1971), p. 3.

⁵² *EB*, p. 46.

⁵³ For both Bo Gustafsson (1972, p. 90) and Thomas Meyer (1977, p. 137), Bernstein’s 1895 afterword to Heretier’s study represents the “decisive break with Marxism.”

that "capitalist society may turn out to be much more adaptable than you think," which, in 1882, Bernstein had simply shrugged off as "regrettable bourgeois hesitancy," had come back to haunt him.⁵⁴ In the end, Bernstein abandoned his belief in the eventual "collapse" of capitalism, the core principle of revolutionary *attentisme* which he had held since Bebel's memorable 1872 Berlin speech. Instead, he began to suspect that Marx's and Engels' "scientific socialism" was, in fact, a sophisticated form of dogmatism which assailed the scientific integrity of socialism. "[T]he party's responsibilities increase with its power, and so does the need to be completely clear about where one stands. For this reason, a close examination of our [Marxist] theory is more vital today than ever before."⁵⁵

However, Bernstein's theoretical qualms blinded him to the practical consequences that might ensue from such a thorough "revision" of Marxist theory. He recognized only later that, "In the midst of my theoretical struggle, I allowed myself to be carried away and burden my party with more than it could handle. This was undoubtedly a significant political mistake."⁵⁶ Indeed, over the decades of its existence, the party leadership – exemplified by August Bebel – had fought hard to reap the benefits of an ideologically unified labor movement. Empirical evidence contrary to Marxist expectations would punch holes in its economic determinism and thus weaken the powerful eschatological expectations of the masses, who had been encouraged to place an almost religious faith in the beneficial workings of Marx's "objective, historical laws."⁵⁷

With his characteristic intellectual honesty that bordered on political naiveté, Bernstein displayed the heart of a dedicated theorist who was ready to blame the party's Marxist rhetoric for the existing theory–practice gap, and not its socialist reformism. Ignaz Auer, who did not mind the beneficial political effects of a quasi-theological "Marxist faith," could only marvel at Bernstein's "strategical blunder" at calling the party's bluff: "Do you really think that a party, resting on fifty years of literature and forty years of organization, can reverse its theory at the snap of your fingers? What you demand, my dear Ede, one does neither openly admit nor formally vote on; one simply does it."⁵⁸ Undeterred, Bernstein put his spotless reputation on the line and, only two years after Engels' death, took the first steps toward "revising Marxism."

Throughout this early revisionist period, he was engaged in a precarious

⁵⁴ ES, pp. 23–24.

⁵⁵ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) in MS, p. 327.

⁵⁶ ES, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Kautsky to Bernstein (February 26, 1898), *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, C181.

⁵⁸ Ignaz Auer cited in Bernstein, *Ignaz Auer*, p. 63.

balancing act, desperately seeking to avoid the dangers of both endangering party unity and losing his theoretical influence. Thus, with the threat of expulsion permanently hanging over him, Bernstein cautiously reassured Kautsky that he was neither fighting “the basic principles of historical materialism, nor the doctrine of class struggle, nor the character of social democracy as the party of the proletariat.”⁵⁹ Similarly, he declared that he had no intention of revising the practical portion of the party program. Rather, his goal was *theoretical revision*: the effort “to create unity of theory and reality, of formulation and action.”⁶⁰ Differing fundamentally from Kautsky’s defensive conception of the theorist as guardian of the doctrinal purity of theory, Bernstein formulated a Kant-influenced “critique of socialist reason”⁶¹ which profoundly questioned the main theoretical assumptions and predictions of Engels’ “scientific socialism.”

Yet he did not set out to modify Marxist theory simply in order to fit the atheoretical reformism of the party *Praktiker*. For Bernstein, political theory was neither an edifying afterthought nor a justification for instrumentalist political practice. Rather, he considered the organic link between theory and practice as one in which theory preceded practice, not the other way around.⁶² Insisting that the party’s revolutionary language was deliberately designed to “fudge categories,”⁶³ Bernstein castigated Bebel’s and Kautsky’s “supramarxist cant.”⁶⁴ In his opinion, Kautsky stifled the all-important process of open “social scientific inquiry” by consecrating a vulgarized Marxism of metaphysical categories devoid of any empirical validity. Bernstein frequently shored up his own arguments by skillfully combining his harsh critique of the “existing gaps and contradictions in Marxist theory” with timely invocations of carefully selected passages from Engels’ later writings.⁶⁵

In particular, he loved to cite Engels’ “final testament” – his 1895 preface to Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France* – without mentioning that Liebknecht had trimmed it in such a fashion that Engels was made to appear “a peaceful worshipper of legality at any price.”⁶⁶ It is difficult to come to a final judgment on why Bernstein chose to disregard the remaining revolutionary core underlying his mentor’s mantle of tactical moderation. Did he need the aura of Marxism to be taken seriously as a

⁵⁹ Bernstein to Kautsky (October 27, 1898), *Adler A*.

⁶⁰ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) in *MS*, p. 324.

⁶¹ Bernstein to Kautsky (November 9, 1898), *Adler A*.

⁶² Eduard Bernstein, “Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision,” in *SM* 8 (1904), p. 24.

⁶³ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) in *MS*, p. 324.

⁶⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Vom deutschen Arbeiter einst und jetzt” *SM* 10 (1904), p. 175.

⁶⁵ *PS*, p. 28.

⁶⁶ Engels to Karl Kautsky, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, n. d.), p. 461.

theorist? Was he truly convinced that Engels had moved closer to the kind of evolutionary socialism he had gradually come to espouse himself? Henry Tudor notes that one important reason for his misreading of Engels was Bernstein's reconceptualization of the relationship between means and ends.⁶⁷ For Engels, switching political tactics was but a sober act of calculation designed to find the most effective mode of action for the SPD. There were no ethical principles involved in calculating the revolutionary coming of socialism along "strict mathematical laws": "Setting the moral question aside, as a revolutionary I welcome any means – both the most violent one and the seemingly most restrained – that will lead to the end . . . In my opinion, you [Gerson Trier] are mistaken to turn a purely tactical question into one involving principles."⁶⁸ Bernstein, on the other hand, had begun to reject revolutionary violence as a means of social change in complex, modern societies, seeking to escape the amoral, instrumentalist means–end calculations of the political realist. Sympathetic to Kant's celebrated Enlightenment notion of the "moral politician," he refused to separate means and ends for purely tactical advantage.

Emphasizing what he called the "evolutionary side of Marx and Engels," Bernstein claimed that the adoption of his critical stance would liberate the party from its dualism and actually lead to a "further development and elaboration of Marxist doctrine."⁶⁹ Making Marxist theory fair game to critical assessments, he validated new forms of socialist eclecticism which were not only legitimate but, as he saw it, even preferable. After all, for Bernstein, evolutionism and philosophical eclecticism were part of the socialist heritage. To justify his claim, he again cited his late mentor Friedrich Engels, who had reminded his comrades that, "[W]e German socialists are proud to descend from not only Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, but also from Kant, Fichte, and Hegel."⁷⁰ Believing that he was working out a coherent view consistent with "evolutionary" Marxist principles, Bernstein rarely entertained the thought that he might have irretrievably broken with Marxist doctrine.⁷¹

Ultimately, Bernstein formulated three concrete revisionist claims, published in *Neue Zeit* and *Vorwärts* between 1896 and 1899, in both his famous series of articles, entitled "Problems of Socialism," and in

⁶⁷ Tudor, "Introduction," in *MS*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Engels to Gerson Trier (December 18, 1889), *MEW* 37, p. 327.

⁶⁹ *PS*, p. 28.

⁷⁰ Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1975), pp. 7–8.

⁷¹ For example, during the 1903 Dresden Party Conference he admitted to his "heretical views" regarding "certain aspects of Marx's thought" (*Protokoll 1903 Dresden*, pp. 391–396).

subsequent responses to socialist critics like the Russian emigrés George Plekhanov and Alexander Helphand (“Parvus”), editor of *Sächsische Arbeiter-Zeitung*.⁷² First, Bernstein directed the brunt of his argument against the widespread Marxist rhetoric of Bebel’s great “*Kladderadatsch*” – the inevitable and sudden collapse of bourgeois society due to the fundamental contradictions in the capitalist mode of production.⁷³ While he explicitly allowed for the *possibility* of future “political catastrophes” like large-scale wars or sustained civil unrest, Bernstein rejected the Erfurt Program’s economic determinism inherent in the idea of terminal capitalist crises. While there might well be limited crises, empirical evidence suggested that “we shall no longer be dealing with the old kind of trade crisis” and, therefore, “[we] will have to throw overboard all speculations that such a crisis will bring about the great social upheaval.”⁷⁴ Suggesting that capitalism was getting better at containing its own contradictions, Bernstein pointed to the stabilizing role of cartels, trusts, modern communication, and the international expansion of the credit system as the main reasons for the unexpected flexibility of late-nineteenth-century capitalism.

Second, and counterfactually, he argued that, even if Marx was right in his assertion that economic crises were to become ever more catastrophic, and that the SPD would gain power under conditions of a capitalist breakdown, the party was not prepared to govern without the bourgeoisie.⁷⁵ “Social democracy should neither expect nor desire the imminent collapse of the existing economic system . . . What social democracy should be doing, and doing for a long time to come, is organize the working class politically, train it for democracy, and fight for any and all reforms in the state which are designed to raise the working class and make the state more democratic.”⁷⁶ Like Engels in his later work, Bernstein focused on the central importance of what might be called the “transition problem” in socialist theory.⁷⁷ But contrary to Engels, Bernstein turned against the dominant Marxist view that, once

⁷² The most important of these essays are translated in *MS*.

⁷³ Bernstein to Kautsky, (October 10, 1898), *Adler A*.

⁷⁴ Bernstein, “The Struggle of Social Democracy and Revolution,” in *MS*, p. 166. For an excellent account of the history of the “breakdown theory” within German social democracy, see Rudolf Walther, “... aber nach der Sündflut kommen wir und nur wir”: “Zusammenbruchstheorie”, *Marxismus und politisches Defizit in der SPD, 1890–1914* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1981); and F. R. Hansen, *The Breakdown of Capitalism: A History of the Idea in Western Marxism, 1883–1983* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

⁷⁵ Bernstein, “The Conquest of Political Power,” in *MS*, p. 306; and Bernstein, “Critical Interlude,” in *ibid.*, p. 220. See also, *PS*, pp. 45, 206.

⁷⁶ Eduard Bernstein, “The Struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy,” in *MS*, p. 169.

⁷⁷ Bernstein to Kautsky (June 29, 1896), *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, DV375.

the economic conditions had sufficiently "matured," the transition to a "new society" was, in essence, a political problem that would be solved by a single act of seizure of political power by the proletariat.⁷⁸ Rather than arguing for the wholesale liquidation of the existing capitalist system, Bernstein opted for "evolution": its gradual democratization via the extension of political rights. In fact, he believed that "[N]owadays social democracy can do more as an opposition party than it could if it suddenly gained control through some catastrophe."⁷⁹ In his opinion, it was foolish to tell the working class simply to wait for the "right moment" in the development of the mode of production and then, in one blow, seize political power and immediately build the "new socialist society." Rather, the desired transformation of capitalist society into socialism would prove to be a painfully slow, evolutionary process, to be guided by ethical ideals.

No doubt, Bernstein resurrected the old liberal-reformist thesis of "society growing into socialism," an idea popular with non-Marxist social democrats in the 1860s, but harshly condemned by Engels as "the old image of the unencumbered 'evolution' of the existing mess into a socialist society."⁸⁰ Here, Bernstein obviously disagreed with his late mentor:

The steady expansion of the sphere of social obligations (i.e. the obligations of the individual towards society, his corresponding rights, and the obligations of society towards the individual), the extension of the right of society, as organized in the nation or the state, to regulate economic life; the growth of democratic self-government in municipality, district, and province, and the extended responsibilities of these bodies – for me all these things mean development toward socialism, or, if you will, piecemeal realization of socialism.⁸¹

While continuing to reject the "simplistic belief in the creative power of revolutionary force," Bernstein equally sharply refused to accede to the political passivity and opportunism of accepting a regime that denied its subjects basic political rights. As the first necessary "precondition" of socialism, he called for a "radical break" from the authoritarian political order of the German Empire – a demand he reiterated throughout the Wilhelmine Era.⁸²

⁷⁸ See also Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1867–1914*, p. 240.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁸⁰ Engels to Kautsky (July 29, 1891) *MEW* 38, p. 125.

⁸¹ Bernstein, "The Struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy," in *MS*, p. 168.

⁸² See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, "Der Stil des Reformismus," in *SM* 15 (1909), p. 1,225; and *Die deutsche Revolution*, vol. I (Berlin, 1921), p. 8. For an analysis of Bernstein's arguments in favor of a thorough democratization of the German Empire as a premise for a socialist foreign policy, see Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Kolonialpolitik*, pp. 301–334.

Third, as the result of quantitative research done in connection with the hotly disputed "Agrarian Question" at the 1894 and 1895 party conferences, Bernstein threw out Marx's so-called "immiseration thesis." He denied the existence of a gigantic social simplification process that would lead to the disappearance of both the middle classes and the peasantry, leaving the working class more and more impoverished in an ever-widening process of capital concentration, cartelization, and monopolization. Using statistical data drawn from the 1895 Prussian Census, Bernstein argued that his findings did not support a "polarization" of society into a small class of capitalists and the proletarian masses. Contrary to Marxist assumptions, he maintained that the social spectrum in Prussia had expanded during the 1880s, thus clearly contradicting Marx's predictions about the "disappearing" middle classes.⁸³ Under the modern conditions of late-nineteenth-century capitalism, the middle class was changing in composition and actually *growing in complexity*. This insight was especially important, since it served Bernstein as both a practical criterion for his piecemeal reformism and an empirical base from which to attack "scientific socialism."

In a famous statement which he later qualified, Bernstein spoke of the revolutionary "final goal" as bearing no meaning for him, while the daily struggle of the "movement" was "everything."⁸⁴ Eager to draw a thick line through all "imagined final goals," Bernstein asserted that there was "more socialism in a good factory act than in the nationalization of a whole group of factories."⁸⁵ In elevating radical liberal demands to the "far-reaching general principle of society, the fulfillment of which will be socialism," Bernstein sought to synthesize socialist and liberal demands: "For Social Democracy, the defence of civil liberty has always taken precedence over the fulfillment of any economic postulate. The aim of all socialist measures, even those that outwardly appear to be coercive measures, is the development and protection of the free personality."⁸⁶ "What makes us socialists," Bernstein wrote to the Austrian labor leader Victor Adler, "is neither a hypothetical future state nor the prospect of the great general expropriation, but our sense of justice . . . [T]he striving for equality and justice is . . . the lasting element in our movement which survives all changes in doctrine."⁸⁷

⁸³ Eduard Bernstein, "Statement to the 1898 Stuttgart Party Conference," in *MS*, p. 288.

⁸⁴ Bernstein, "The Struggle of Social Democracy and the Social Revolution: 2. The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy," in *ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸⁷ Bernstein to Adler, (March 3, 1899), *Adler BW*, p. 289.

At the height of the Revisionist Controversy

By 1898, Bernstein's forceful critique of "socialist reason" had, predictably, managed to infuriate the Marxist leadership of the SPD. As the dispute wore on, Bebel realized that Bernstein had left Marxist grounds altogether, making more severe future clashes inevitable.⁸⁸ Although he commanded great respect in the SPD, Bebel's leadership in the party did not always go unquestioned. More often than he cared to, he had to muster his entire political *repertoire* of persuasion, threats, promises, and compromises to rally the needed majority behind his decisions. His outstanding political instincts and charismatic personality notwithstanding, Bebel was in need of theoretical allies who neither encroached on his political sphere nor caused fractious ideological debates that might endanger the political unity and effectiveness of the SPD.⁸⁹

Since the 1891 Erfurt Program, Bebel had relied on Kautsky to play this role, but their partnership had barely been tested. The unfolding Revisionist Controversy gave them a chance to prove their loyalty to each other in a genuine crisis situation. Both men realized from the very beginning that the "Bernstein Affair" constituted an enormous threat to the ideological hegemony of Marxist theory – and by extension, to their own leadership posts. In a number of private meetings in the summer of 1898, Bebel and Kautsky managed to work out a common anti-Bernstein strategy for the upcoming party conference in Stuttgart.

In the meantime, Bernstein, too, had found a handful of prominent allies for his cause. Most of them were "*Praktiker* with principles" who showed some interest in weakening Marxist ideology without jettisoning socialist theory altogether: Eduard David, a future Interior Minister in the Weimar Republic; Konrad Schmidt, one of the party's leading social philosophers and political economists; the influential lawyer, Wolfgang Heine; and the powerful Reichstag representative, Heinrich Peus. At the same time, however, the party's extreme left wing led by Parvus and Luxemburg vowed to use the Stuttgart Party Conference as an arena to put an end to any form of "bourgeois revisionism," and perhaps even force Bernstein's expulsion from the SPD.

When the conference opened in October 1898, Kautsky assumed the role of the party's "chief ideologist," while Bebel kept a watchful eye over "proper" speaking assignments and the course of the proceedings. At an opportune moment, he decided to force the issue by reading aloud a written defense statement that Bernstein – still unable to enter Germany

⁸⁸ Bebel to Kautsky (September 24, 1898) *Bebel BWK*, p. 111; Bebel to Bernstein (October 22, 1898) *MS*, p. 330.

⁸⁹ See Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen*, pp. 263–264.

without risking arrest – had sent from his London exile. Frequently citing his mentor Engels, Bernstein's note provided an eloquent summary of his liberal-socialist views: "The taking of political power cannot be achieved without political *rights*, and the most important tactical problem which social democracy has to solve at the present is, it seems to me, *the best way to extend the political and industrial rights* of the German working man."⁹⁰

Paul Kampffmeyer, a young fellow-revisionist, later wrote that Bernstein's "Stuttgart Letter" showed the orthodox Marxists what they "really were" but had not dared to admit.⁹¹ Bebel saw things differently. Noting that he fundamentally disagreed with the content of the statement, he left it to Kautsky to dismantle Bernstein's substantive arguments. Kautsky's speech, seconded by Liebknecht, turned out to be a great success with a majority of those conference delegates who soundly rejected Bernstein's irksome "revisionism." Bernstein's few vocal defenders managed to make themselves heard, but they were too weak and disorganized to challenge Kautsky's "official" interpretation.

In the end, the conference participants stopped short of following Rosa Luxemburg's radical call for Bernstein's expulsion. Nevertheless, the "*Bernstein Affaire*" provided the twenty-seven-year-old "Red Rosa" with an opportunity to show her considerable talents. With her sharp intellect and fiery oratory, she awed the delegates by turning her first major political appearance into a brilliant defense of Marxist theory from a radical-left point of view.⁹² When the dust of the conference finally settled, most delegates agreed that the debates had fallen far short of settling the theoretical problems raised by the revisionists. But they also agreed that revisionism was no cause for serious concern, since, as the Austrian labor leader Victor Adler put it so aptly, "[T]here is not a single point of *political practice, of concrete party tactics*, on which Bebel and Auer, Kautsky and Bernstein would not agree."⁹³

Yet, the theoretical problems raised during the party conference would soon afford the atheoretical *Praktiker* in the SPD the excellent opportunity of questioning the utility of theory altogether. For the time being, however, Kautsky and Bernstein continued their sharp ideological battles with seemingly inexhaustible energy in the pages of *Vorwärts* and *Neue Zeit*. Finally, Kautsky and Adler succeeded in pressuring Bernstein to write a longer synopsis of his revisionist views. Hastily, Bernstein obliged, and, in less than twelve weeks, finished his famous "Revisionist Mani-

⁹⁰ Bernstein, "Statement" in *MS*, p. 291.

⁹¹ Paul Kampffmeyer, "Historisches und Theoretisches zur Sozialdemokratie Revisionismus Bewegung," in *SM* 8 (1902), p. 354.

⁹² See Rosa Luxemburg cited in *MS*, pp. 249–269, 276–305.

⁹³ Adler, "The Party Conference at Stuttgart," in *ibid.*, pp. 316, 319.

festo," entitled *The Preconditions of Socialism*. Published in early 1899 and eventually translated into more than thirty languages, the book contained the main arguments of Bernstein's early revisionist period. While regarding it as a crucial milestone in his career, Bernstein openly acknowledged the book's rather narrow conceptual framework. "[The] desire to keep within reasonable bounds a book primarily intended for workers, together with the need to finish it within a few weeks, should explain why an exhaustive treatment of the subject has not even been attempted."⁹⁴ Contrary to the assessment of later commentators, he explicitly warned that *The Preconditions of Socialism* should not be interpreted as "a programmatic work on a large scale."⁹⁵ Indeed, the full features of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism emerged in the form of essays, monographs, and book reviews, drawn out over two decades. Representing only the beginnings of his theoretical quest, *The Preconditions of Socialism* awaited further detailed explorations of the relationship between socialism, social science, liberalism, and ethics.

⁹⁴ *PS*, p. 28.

⁹⁵ *ES*, p. 30.

Part 2

Vision

4 The meaning of socialism

Marxist socialism in the 1890s

The extent to which Bernstein's "revisionism" shook the world of socialist theory is difficult to imagine today. The Marxism that had given the workers' movement its ideological coherence during many years of underground work was being attacked at its very core. As Rosa Luxemburg underscored on several occasions, Bernstein's critique of "socialist reason" was not about "this or that method of struggle, or the use of this and that set of tactics, but the very existence of the social democratic movement."¹ Nothing less than the "correct" meaning of socialism – as proclaimed by the guardians of Marxist orthodoxy – was at stake. But what exactly did "Marxist socialism" mean, given Marx's own sarcastic admission that he did not consider himself a "Marxist?" Which of his and Engels' many, often contradictory publications contained the crucial elements of Marxist doctrine? As became clear in the course of the revisionist controversy, both Bernstein and his orthodox critics could readily produce appropriate citations from the founders' work which seemed to substantiate their opposing claims equally. In fact, Bernstein's steadfast interpretation of Marx's teachings as a "theory of social evolution" leaned heavily on selected passages from Marx's *Capital* and Engels' later writings, allowing him to build a somewhat credible defense of his declaration that he was merely attempting a "revision, vision, and clarification of Marxist socialism."²

As has been pointed out by Alvin Gouldner and a number of other social critics, the origins of this doctrinal ambiguity in the Marxist tradition can be traced back to the existence of at least two different intellectual currents in the Marxist canon.³ Marx and Engels oscillated between their "critical" stance of denouncing existing social practices and

¹ Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*, p. 8.

² Eduard Bernstein, "An meine socialistischen Kritiker," in *SM* 4 (1900), p. 4.

³ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980). See also Meyer, *Bernsteins konstruktiver Sozialismus*.

their more scientific and technological orientation, which championed working-class interests with reference to an ultimate, comprehensive world view based on supposedly "objective" causal laws.⁴ Thus, they frequently found themselves caught in a tension-filled conjunction pitting science against politics, theory against practice, determinism against voluntarism, empiricism against speculative metaphysics, and necessity against freedom. Marx's own relationship to the empirical method and the "scientific enterprise" in general, had always been ambiguous: on one hand, he criticized the "uncritical use of statistics in catalogue-like eruditions,"⁵ while on the other, he had praised his own theories as "essential laws,"⁶ their truths depending on empirical data, since "facts furnish the test of theories."⁷

Bernstein never made a secret of the fact that he preferred the "scientific" tracts of the mature Marx over the passionate essays of the youthful Hegelian philosopher of *praxis*.⁸ Yet, he was also quick to note that those theoretical tensions even appeared in *Capital*, which, despite its impressive theoretical achievement, ultimately amounted to a "piece of propaganda . . . that remained unfinished, because the conflict between propaganda and science made the task more and more difficult for Marx."⁹

Such direct attacks on his mentors' writings, however, were usually sandwiched between long, reassuring paragraphs signalling Bernstein's intense loyalty to a "Marxism understood as a general program, a principle, or an idea of justice."¹⁰ Obviously, Bernstein disagreed with fashionable liberal claims that Marxism had no moral components at all.¹¹ Ultimately, he developed his revisionism from a historically anchored perspective which allowed him to employ the detached language of empiricism against the growing disjuncture between theoretical principles conceived in the middle of the century and the fundamentally changed socioeconomic conditions of *fin-de-siècle* Germany: "[T]he standards of Marx-Engels' theory, which were developed under entirely different

⁴ See Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms*, pp. 34–36; and Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany*, pp. 4–7.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: International, 1973), p. 888.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. III. (New York: International, 1967), p. 831.

⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 119.

⁸ *PS*, pp. 28–46.

⁹ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) *MS*, p. 326.

¹⁰ Eduard Bernstein, "Dialektik und Entwicklung," in *NZ* 17 (1898/99), p. 360.

¹¹ Recently, R. G. Peffer has offered a particularly sophisticated defense of Marx's moral perspective in *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990). His study particularly contributes to the ongoing discussion on Marxist epistemology, ethics, and ontology by showing with great clarity the way relevant philosophical positions are set out. Peffer also provides a useful list of recent participants in the Anglo-American debate on Marxism and morality (pp. 9–10).

premisses and conditions than today's, are not only insufficient but even misleading."¹² But Bernstein's tone became noticeably more impassioned when he turned against contemporary British and German "scientific socialists" whose dogmatic interpretation of Marxist doctrine conflicted with "empirical reality."¹³

For the purposes of this study, then, it is not necessary to engage in a detailed textual exegesis outlining intricate comparisons between the principles of revisionism and the conflicting attributes of the two different Marxisms.¹⁴ Since Bernstein's critique emerged as a clear protest against the Marxist orthodoxy reigning in the 1890s, we must instead focus on the principal theoretical works that gave Marxist theory its definitive expression in the 1891 Erfurt Program. For better or worse, socialism came to be understood in terms of Kautsky's popular *Das Erfurter Programm* – a book that drew its intellectual inspiration from Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, Marx's *Capital*, and, of course, *The Communist Manifesto*. Kautsky, Bernstein, and all other prominent Marxist theorists assumed that the teleological and scientific language of the *Manifesto* formed the core of "orthodox" Marxism. As the "Baron" untiringly reminded his revisionist opponents, "true socialism" was a science embodied in the founders' systematic writings. There, they had explained their discovery of the "natural laws of capitalist production," which unfolded with "iron necessity" toward the "inevitable socialist goal."¹⁵ The hallmark of modern, scientific socialism was the disclosure of the objective-teleological, historical process finding its necessary, subjective expression in the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat.

But for the "revisionist" Bernstein, the meaning of socialism was no longer accurately captured in Kautsky's "orthodox" Marxism. Since its theoretical vision needed correction, Bernstein set out to reconceptualize socialism along revisionist lines which involved, first and foremost, the rejection of Kautsky's determinism and the complete deletion of the Erfurt Program's theoretical claims.¹⁶ While the critique of the party program represented the first step toward a new understanding of

¹² Bernstein, "Drei Antworten auf ein Inquisitorium," in *Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Sozialismus: Teil III: Sozialistische Controversen*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Dümmler, 1904), p. 14.

¹³ Bernstein to Kautsky (February 16, 1898), *Adler A*.

¹⁴ Recently, Gary Steenson has offered useful criteria for a broader conception of Marxism: see *After Marx, Before Lenin*, pp. 261–267.

¹⁵ *C I*, pp. 10, 761–763.

¹⁶ Bernstein, "An meine sozialistischen Kritiker," pp. 5–7; "Vom Wesen des Socialismus," in *Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Sozialismus*, pp. 39–56; "Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision," *SM* 10 (1904), pp. 19–26; and "Der Revisionismus in der Sozialdemokratie," in Helmut Hirsch, ed. *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, 2nd ed. (Berlin-Bonn: Dietz, 1976), p. 132. Indeed, Bernstein's own blueprint for the 1921 Görlitz Program includes virtually no references to his philosophy of science.

socialism, the full consequences of Bernstein's disagreement with the "orthodox" Marxists became apparent only with the publication of Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution?* Distributed in 1899, this brilliant pamphlet offered an admirably succinct exposition of "scientific socialism," packing the theoretical core of Engels' and Kautsky's arguments into a few precisely formulated pages. Consequently, our brief reconsideration of *fin-de-siècle* "Marxist orthodoxy," which Bernstein fought tooth and claw for more than two decades, will begin with an exposition of the crucial features of Engels' comprehensive *Weltanschauung*; it will then move on to an analysis of Kautsky's commentary on the Erfurt Program; and will conclude with a review of Luxemburg's famous essay.

Long-standing arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, Marx and Engels agreed on all fundamental matters of socialist theory.¹⁷ Marx wrote a favorable forward to his friend's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, explicitly giving his nod of approval to the use of the term "scientific socialism" in the context of their social theory.¹⁸ Having repeatedly discussed with Engels the main outline of *Anti-Dühring*, Marx even provided his intellectual alter ego with a critical compendium of Dühring's views on the history of political economy.¹⁹ The cooperative character of Marx and Engels' theoretical development has been amply documented in their voluminous correspondence and by the testimonies of contemporary observers. The quality of such evidence should be sufficient finally to lay to rest groundless notions that Marx did not share his collaborator's views, particularly his philosophy of science.²⁰

In general terms, Engels' account of "scientific socialism" amounted to a sophisticated apology for Hegel's method of dialectics with the help of novel insights drawn from modern natural science. According to the "General," a closer observation of simple cause-effect relationships furnished irrefutable proof for nature's evolution according to dialectical laws, thus belying the mechanical method of "metaphysical" materialists who considered their objects of investigation "fixed, rigid, given once for

¹⁷ For the "dichotomist" argument, see, for example, Lichtheim, *Marxism: A Historical and Critical Study*; Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968); Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972); Norman Levine, *The Tragic Deception: Marx contra Engels* (Oxford: Clio, 1975); Frederick Bender, ed. *The Betrayal of Marx* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); and Terrell Carver, *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983).

¹⁸ Karl Marx, "Foreword to the French Edition," in Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, pp. 1–4.

¹⁹ *MECW* 25, p. xiii.

²⁰ This view is shared by Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 48–64; and J. D. Hunley, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels: A Reinterpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991).

all.”²¹ At the same time, Marx and Engels realized that Hegel’s “fundamental laws of dialectical reasoning” needed to be separated from their idealist content and given a “real basis” in a materialist conception of history, based on developing contradictions in the economic mode of production.²² In other words, Engels understood the study of the laws of dialectics as “the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society, and thought,” thus marrying a Hegelian philosophical framework to the natural sciences. To a greater degree than Marx, Engels was quite keen on Darwin’s groundbreaking 1859 *Origin of Species*, which – although non-predictive, non-determinist, and non-teleological – served him as the prime example for such a “new materialist science,” linking the dialectical development of class society with evolutionary biology.²³

Seeking to bridge the gap between rationalism and empiricism, as well as humanism and naturalism, Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* represented the ambitious attempt to create an integral world view combining politics, science, and philosophy as an interdependent social “totality.” This allowed Engels simultaneously to defend the sociohistorical character of all scientific knowledge and to promulgate “scientific socialism” as the only possible theoretical expression of the proletarian movement. In fact, the fusing of natural laws with social development within the framework of a socialist *Weltanschauung* even strengthened the legitimacy of a “dialectical science” by making theory “real” in the concrete, historical struggles of a proletariat that, *in potentia*, already bore the final socialist goal.

Popularizing the insights of Marx’s dense *Capital*, Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* dedicated an entire section to the exposition of political economy as an essentially historical science whose modes of production and relations of material exchange develop in dialectical fashion with the regularity of laws of nature. Equipped with the dialectical key capable of breaking the secret code of capitalist social relations, Engels could claim to offer a genuinely “scientific” critique of classical political economy. In his opinion, the Marxist method far surpassed previous “eclectic” forms of socialism by providing the modern proletariat with a powerful analytical tool. “Bourgeois” notions of “eternal truth,” “original sin,” and “divine justice”

²¹ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *MECW* 25, p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 25.

²³ Terrell Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 238, 245–246. I am indebted to Terrell Carver for pointing out to me that Marx was not rushing to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin; he merely sent Darwin a copy of the second German edition of *Capital* at the request of his son-in-law Edward Aveling. For an excellent article on this issue, see Terence Ball, “Marx and Darwin: A Reconsideration,” in *Reappraising Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), pp. 229–249.

could finally be debunked as ideological distortions hiding repressive social relations.²⁴ By revealing existing contradictions at the *economic base* of society – the disjuncture between the dynamic forces of production and stagnant relations of production – socialist theory assumed in *praxis* the status of an objective social movement struggling against oppressive conditions, independent of the individual's ethical ideals: "Modern socialism is nothing but a reflex, in thought, of this [class] conflict in fact; its ideal reflection in the minds, first, of the class directly suffering under it, the working class."²⁵ Thus, Engels' socialism provided the scientific explanation of the proletariat's historical role as the social force that was bound to complete the transition from capitalism to socialism. Indeed, only scientific socialism harbored the appropriate conceptual means for the working class to comprehend its historical condition and consciously transform society with the "final goal" of establishing rational control of material production.²⁶

Kautsky's 1891 commentary on the Erfurt Program, entitled *Das Erfurter Programm*, was hailed by Engels as an "exemplary piece of work" which elaborated in less philosophical language on the founders' conviction that "scientific socialism" was indeed possible as a cognitive activity carried on within the framework of a comprehensive world view. Seeking to simplify Engels' arguments even further, Kautsky provided the German labor movement with a theory of social totality that emphasized the alleged connection between Darwinian natural science and Marxist sociohistorical arguments. Pushing Engels' "nomological" approach to new extremes, Kautsky viewed human history as a natural process taking place according to definite laws. Designed to create the propagandistic effect of an "exact" science revealing the "immanent laws of the capitalist mode of production," a "theory of collapse" featured prominently in Kautsky's scheme.

We consider the collapse of our current society inevitable, since we know that the economic development, with natural necessity [*Naturnotwendigkeit*], will create conditions which force the exploited to fight against private property; we also know that the number and the strength of the exploited is increasing while the number and strength of the reactionary exploiters decreases; finally, we know that it [the economic development] will lead to unbearable hardship for the masses, which will force the people to choose between passive immiseration or the active overthrow of the existing property relations.²⁷

Over and over again, Kautsky praised the unique ability of "scientific

²⁴ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *MECW* 25, p. 255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 254, 270.

²⁷ Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm*, p. 102. See also *ibid.* pp. 106, 253.

socialists” to identify socialism’s “natural and necessary goal” – the seizure of political power in the state and the transformation of the capitalist mode of production.²⁸ Neither relying on the “beautiful dream” of socialist utopians like Owen, Fourier, and Weitling, nor on the ethical voluntarism of neo-Kantian moral philosophers, Kautsky characterized Marx’s method as “penetrating deeply into the social tendencies of its time,” ultimately revealing the “coming of a fundamentally different social order” as the “inevitable consequence of an objectively necessary process.”²⁹

The correspondence of objective sociohistorical conditions and the subjective moment was to be accomplished in the self-constitution of social democracy, the political party of the revolutionary proletariat. Capitalist economic development fostered strong solidaristic bonds among members of the working class, leading to the formation of a proletarian “*ecclesia militans*” – the concrete political expression of “maturing” inner contradictions of capitalism.³⁰ Thus, the ultimate victory of the working class and the realization of its “final goal” were based upon an objective-teleological, historical process.³¹

Rosa Luxemburg affirmed Kautsky’s nomological interpretation and further strengthened the notion of the scientific character of Marxist socialism by identifying three “objectively necessary” consequences of capitalist development. Firstly, there was the growing disorganization and “anarchy” of the capitalist economy, a tendency “inevitably leading to its ruin.” Secondly, the progressive socialization of the process of production created “the germ of the future social order.” Thirdly, there was the increased organization and consciousness of the proletarian class, which constituted “the active factor in the coming revolution.”³² Thus, the socialist revolution was the inevitable consequence of both “the growing contradictions of capitalist economy,” and “the comprehension by the working class of the unavoidability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation.”³³

Rejecting with Engels the “metaphysical viewpoint” of the undialectical bourgeois scientist, Luxemburg argued that Marx’s accurate prediction of the “inevitability of capitalism’s collapse” was only possible *because* he had looked at the “hieroglyphics of capitalist economy” from a *partisan* perspective: “And it is precisely because he took the socialist viewpoint as a point of departure for his analysis of bourgeois society

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–126, 190, 222.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–133, 137, 253.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 207.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 230–231.

³² Luxemburg, *Reform Or Revolution?*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 35.

that he was in the position to give a scientific base to the socialist movement.”³⁴ Hence, socialism was not only *possible* as a proletarian science, but it was indeed the *sole* social theory which corresponded directly to objective, empirical developments in society.

Like Engels and Kautsky, Luxemburg fully recognized the importance of sharply separating the “scientific character” of Marx’s socialism from the voluntarism of an “ethical socialism” based upon “the millenarian dreams of humanity.”³⁵ Relying on the method of historical materialism, she explained the developmental course of socialist theory from these “insufficient seven-league boots of the childhood of the proletariat” to Marx’s “correct elaboration of the principles of scientific socialism.”³⁶ Defining the meaning of socialism in exclusively Marxist terms, Luxemburg’s pamphlet convincingly illustrates the hegemony of orthodox Marxism in *fin-de-siècle* socialist theory: “[T]here could be no socialism – at least in Germany – outside of Marxist socialism, and there could be no socialist class struggle outside of social democracy. From then on [the emergence of Marx’s theory], socialism and Marxism, the proletarian struggle for emancipation, and social democracy were identical.”³⁷

Having asserted the complete identity of Marxism and socialism, Luxemburg was in a position to point to the philosophical core of Bernstein’s “revisionist misreading of Marx” in his famous statement, “The final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything.” By denying the central significance of the “final goal” in socialist theory, Bernstein had abandoned Marxist teleology – the theoretical basis of “scientific socialism, because, for a proletarian party standing on the firm grounds of the daily struggle,” there existed “no more practical question than that of the final goal.”³⁸ Kautsky concurred wholeheartedly: “What could be more depressing than such gross misinterpretations [of Marx] from a man who himself defended historical materialism for more than two decades?”³⁹ Consequently, both Kautsky and Luxemburg excoriated Bernstein for his “flawed” philosophy of science, which had abandoned Hegelian dialectics in favor of Kant’s philosophical dualism: “We have here, in brief, the explanation of the socialist program by means of ‘pure reason.’ We have here, to use simpler language, an idealist explanation of socialism. The objective necessity of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Luxemburg cited in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Stuttgart vom 3–8. Oktober 1898* (Berlin, 1898), p. 99.

³⁹ Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm*, p. 47.

socialism, the explanation of socialism as the result of the material development of society, falls to the ground.”⁴⁰

Luxemburg’s and Kautsky’s assessment was shared by the Russian “Father of Marxism,” George Plekhanov, who in a brief, but intense philosophical dispute with Bernstein and Konrad Schmidt in *Neue Zeit*, had targeted their underlying neo-Kantian philosophy: “The bourgeoisie hopes to find in Kant’s philosophy the ‘opium’ by which it seeks to lull the recalcitrant proletariat to sleep. Neo-Kantianism has become rather fashionable among members of the ruling class because it furnishes the mental weapon with which to fight for their existence.”⁴¹ Unlike most of his German comrades, Plekhanov’s background in Hegelian philosophy was impeccable; he skillfully fought against what he considered the repulsive “revisionist infiltration” of Humean and Kantian skepticism into the socialist movement:

Surely this is a complete break with revolutionary tactics and communism . . . I almost took sick from these [Bernstein’s] articles; what is most vexing of all is that Bernstein is partly right: for instance, it is impossible to count upon the realization of the socialist ideal in the near future. But truth may be employed for different ends; Bernstein uses it the sooner to filch the Philistine nightcap. Or is the Philistine to be the *Normalmensch* of the future? With this question, a shudder runs through me and I want to say with Gogol: How tedious is this world, sirs!⁴²

In a letter to Kautsky, Plekhanov went even further: “If Bernstein is right in his critical endeavors, one may ask what remains of the philosophical and socialist ideas of our teachers? . . . And in truth, one would have to reply: not very much!”⁴³

Indeed, Plekhanov’s and Luxemburg’s critique struck at the heart of the matter. Scrambling to bridge the tension between skeptical empiricism and Kantian ethical idealism, Bernstein had fundamentally changed the meaning of socialism. True, by turning against the nomological rhetoric of his comrades, he made room for human volition, morality, and historical contingency. At the same time, however, his ethical socialism shattered the unity and explanatory power of the Marxist-Hegelian system. What began as a spark of Kantian doubt directed against the “dogmatism” of Marxist orthodoxy ended in total theoretical “subversion.”

⁴⁰ Luxemburg, *Reform Or Revolution?*, p. 13.

⁴¹ George Plekhanov, “Konrad Schmidt gegen Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels,” in *NZ* 16.1 (1898/99), p. 145. See also “Bernstein und der Materialismus,” in *NZ* 16.2 (1897/98), pp. 546–555, and “Materialismus oder Kantianismus,” in *NZ* 17.1 (1898/99), pp. 589–596, 626–632.

⁴² Plekhanov cited in Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1963), pp. 172–173.

⁴³ Plekhanov cited in *ibid.*, p. 176.

Socialism and science

Bernstein never fully acknowledged the enormous ramifications of his revisionist initiative. Though he openly argued for the importance of “modernizing Marxism” – the critical revision of Marxist theory from a *fin-de-siècle* perspective – he also claimed to have remained “within the bounds of the founders’ system.” But was it possible simply to “correct” Kautsky’s and Bebel’s orthodoxy by letting the “evolutionary Marx” carry the point against the “dogmatic Marx?”⁴⁴ What exactly did Bernstein mean when he spoke of his efforts “to separate the vital parts of [Marx’s] theory from its outdated accessories?”⁴⁵ Struggling to find a firm criterion that would help him identify these “vital parts,” Bernstein began to vacillate. At times, he asserted that he was “merely” engaged in a project of “cutting a few branches from an otherwise healthy [Marxist] tree.”⁴⁶ On other occasions, he admitted to be involved in generating “self-criticism of . . . not just a few superficialities but of very substantial components of Marxism’s theoretical structure.”⁴⁷ Once Bernstein had assumed the posture of the Cartesian rationalist who attacks all dogmatic claims, his doubts led to more doubts. And, most importantly, why exactly was the “new” theoretical foundation for an “evolutionary socialism” more in step with modern social conditions?

Bernstein embarked on his critical enterprise by first exploring the “new” meaning of “socialism” and “science” itself. All goals and activities of a “scientifically based” socialist movement, he claimed, could only be determined in accordance with “knowledge capable of objective proof, that is, knowledge which refers to, and conforms with, nothing but empirical experience and logic.”⁴⁸ Therefore, he insisted on the distinction between “pure” and “applied” scientific theories. Whereas pure theory was “constant” in its universally valid, “cognitive principles which are derived from the sum total of the relevant data,” applied science was based on the application of these universalist principles to particular phenomena or cases, thus yielding provisional, or “variable” knowledge.⁴⁹ This analytic distinction spilled over into Bernstein’s separation of natural and social sciences: the former sought to uncover purely causal relationships between natural objects, and the latter dealt in addition with “products of artifice, based on plan, intention, and acts of will.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Bildung, Wissenschaft und Partei” in *SM* 11 (1907), p. 711; “Der Sozialismus als sozialwissenschaftliche Entwicklungslehre,” in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt* (Berlin: Dietz, 1923), pp. 5–10; and *Was ist der Marxismus: Antwort auf eine Hetze* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1924), pp. 1–8.

⁴⁵ Bernstein, “Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft,” in *SM* 5 (1901), p. 606.

⁴⁶ Bernstein, “Dialektik und Entwicklung,” p. 333.

⁴⁷ *PS*, pp. 11, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Situated in the complex realm of human intersubjectivity, social science yielded less precise results in its search for universal patterns. Consequently, Bernstein defended the primacy of natural science and the validity of its categories for social scientific analysis, for in their attempt to formulate general social theories, social scientists were dependent on empirically verifiable “facts.” They could not rely on purely deductive operations from first principles in the manner of mathematics or geometry, but were forced to employ a “positivist-inductive method” characterized by falsifiability and contingency.⁵¹ Based on these preliminary distinctions, Bernstein proceeded to provide a “systematic extraction of the pure science of Marxist socialism from its applied part.”⁵² This procedure would allow him to specify which parts of Marx’s system could be revised or removed without any damage to its “pure” theoretical foundation:

Everything that is unconditional in the Marxist characterization of bourgeois society and its course of development, that is, everything whose validity is free from national and local peculiarities, would accordingly belong to the domain of pure science. But everything which refers to facts and hypotheses which are conditional on a particular time or place, that is, particular forms of development, would belong to applied science.⁵³

The problem with this formulation was two-fold: firstly, Bernstein ultimately criticized not only the “applied parts” of Marxist theory, but attacked its “pure” parts (e.g., historical materialism and the theory of surplus value) as well, thus defeating the very purpose of this troubling distinction. Secondly, his analytic investigations betrayed the “uncritical” (in a Marxist sense) character of his enterprise – his closeness to the undialectical, “bourgeois” epistemology of the British empiricists. Orthodox Marxists immediately claimed that Bernstein had forsaken Marx’s emphasis on dynamism and sociohistorical totality – a unifying theory of modern society *and* its development – in favor of what Marx had once derided as Comte’s “shit-positivism.” Although he was aware of such criticism, Bernstein nonetheless defended his project as “critical,” understood as providing the necessary bulwark against the rigid dogmatism of Marxist orthodoxy.⁵⁴ By implication, however, this meant that his revisionist position no longer corresponded to the Marxist-Hegelian philosophical universe – a politically dangerous conclusion for anybody belonging to a “Marxist” party.

⁵⁰ Eduard Bernstein, “Naturprinzipien und Wirtschaftsfragen,” in *SM* 4 (1900), p. 320.

⁵¹ Bernstein, “Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft,” p. 602; Bernstein to Kautsky (December 23, 1897) *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, DV427.

⁵² *PS*, p. 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Pointing out that the “predictions” of the Erfurt Program were clearly built on the particularity of space and time – backed up by “variable” hypotheses and facts – Bernstein found the program’s theoretical assertions to be “unscientific” in their claim to present “inevitable” laws of social development. Ossified into party dogma, Kautsky’s “pseudo-scientific deductions” damaged what Bernstein considered the “critical” heritage of the socialist (and liberal!) enterprise – its persistent subversion of dogma of any kind. Any socialism based on “science” had to remain open to new theoretical propositions and empirical developments derived from actual political and social practice.⁵⁵ For Bernstein, Kautsky’s dogmatism was but the latest manifestation of a trend that could be traced back to the influence Hegel’s speculative philosophy had exerted on the young Marx.

Indeed, Bernstein charged Marx and Engels with having built their social theory on Hegel’s fatal “metaphysical blunder” of “subordinat[ing] any claim to scientific status to a preconceived tendency.”⁵⁶ By implication, Bernstein accused the founders of remaining the prisoners of a metaphysical doctrine, which, in deductive fashion, constructed social developments from *a priori* formulas: “[Marxist theory] aims at being a scientific investigation and also proving a thesis laid down long before its conception, that is based on a formula in which the result to which the exposition ought to lead is laid down beforehand.”⁵⁷ Spinning out the “logical somersaults of Hegelianism,” Marx and Engels had overlooked the “concrete facts” of specific economic developments which would have provided the necessary empirical correction to “the self-deceptions they entertained about the actual course of [current] events.”⁵⁸ Thereby, Bernstein not only questioned the scientific integrity of Marxism, but he also parted with Engels’ notion of a social “totality,” expressed in the compatibility of a socialist *Weltanschauung* and “proletarian” (i.e., “dialectical”) scientific research. In a letter to the Italian socialist Antonio Labriola, Bernstein openly admitted that he no longer considered Marxism such an all-encompassing “system,” but a particular “way of seeing things” which, first and foremost, needed to “maintain its character as a free, open science.”⁵⁹

Undoubtedly, Engels would have attacked his pupil’s philosophy of science as a sophisticated brand of “bourgeois metaphysics,” overly indulgent and undialectically reifying rigid distinctions between science

⁵⁵ Bernstein, “Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision,” in *SM* 8 (1904), pp. 9–11.

⁵⁶ *PS*, pp. 46, 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 36.

⁵⁹ Bernstein, “Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft,” p. 606.

and world view. Ironically, Bernstein, too, polemicized against the “pitfalls of metaphysics;” but unlike his mentor, he employed the term in a Kantian sense, referring to the “speculative dogmatism” of a metaphysics of totality. Indeed, Bernstein’s critique of “socialist reason” meticulously separated knowledge from speculation, science from world view, fact from value, and necessity from freedom. Yet, affirming the validity of an empiricist epistemology for his own intellectual enterprise, Bernstein robbed socialism of its presumed immanence, underscoring that its declared “final goal cannot be constructed *a priori* in abstract fashion,” but had to be formed “from within the practical struggles of the movement itself.”⁶⁰

Teleology and science

Refusing to view human development as a reified and teleological process, Bernstein exchanged Marx’s “knowledge” of immanently unfolding, “objective” tendencies for the kind of historical contingency that underlies Kant’s “hope in progress.” In fact, Bernstein nullified what orthodox Marxists considered the greatest achievement of their philosophy: the overcoming of abstract ideals in its recognition of the dialectical unity of the real movement and socialism’s immanent *telos*: the “seizure of political power by the working class and the expropriation of the capitalists.”⁶¹ Bernstein’s return to Kant’s skepticist epistemology was exemplified in his famous confession that he had “extraordinarily little feeling for, or interest in, what is usually termed the ‘final goal of socialism.’”⁶² Although the setting of socialist objectives was acceptable, and even necessary, science could neither specify nor dictate “*when* and *how* socialists should expect to reach this goal.”⁶³

Rather than treating the “final goal” as a closed empirical category that could be derived dialectically from a “scientific” analysis of the historical process, Bernstein acknowledged the heuristic value of postulating a *transcendental* socialist goal – a necessarily “agnostic” category which had to be complemented by open-ended scientific inquiries conducted in an “objective,” impartial manner.⁶⁴ In other words, Bernstein exchanged the dialectical-scientific status of the “final goal” with that of a socialist “ideal”

⁶⁰ Eduard Bernstein, “Der Revisionismus in der Sozialdemokratie,” in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 106.

⁶¹ Victor Adler, “The Party Conference at Stuttgart,” in *MS*, p. 314.

⁶² Bernstein, “The Theory of Collapse and Colonial Policy,” in *ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶³ Bernstein, “Vom Wesen des Sozialismus,” in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Der Kernpunkt des Streites,” in *SM* 5 (1901), p. 780. Eduard Bernstein, “The Realistic and the Ideological Moments in Socialism,” in *MS*, p. 234.

that was supposed to guide the political practice of the labor movement.⁶⁵ But if socialists could not “know” such a “final goal,” what, if any, was the connection between “science” and “socialism”? Moreover, if Bernstein conceded that socialist political practice was, in fact, dependent on scientific knowledge, what was the exact nature of that relationship?⁶⁶

In order for Marxist orthodoxy to defend its “scientific” status, it had to *prove* the imputed “inevitability” of capitalism’s collapse and the “natural necessity” of its final goal *independent of human volition*, since the characteristic hallmarks dividing “objective” and “subjective” forces were to be found in “conscious, willed, and intentional human activity.”⁶⁷ A natural science like astronomy would be able to predict, say, “a partial solar eclipse on April 8, 1902, without having to rely upon the will of the predicting astronomer or of any observer.”⁶⁸ Incapable of “knowing what is necessary,” Bernstein’s “critical” (Kantian) socialism was indeed inconceivable as “pure” cognitive science. In fact, defined as a “movement toward a cooperative social order of the future, free of exploitation, suppression and material need,” evolutionary socialism was clearly dependent on an “element of will or interest that transcended positive experience.”⁶⁹

For Bernstein, no social system or “ism” calling on subjective forces to transform society could be built exclusively upon scientific foundations.⁷⁰ Expressing both the material and the ideal (moral) interests of the working class in bringing about what *ought to be*, socialism carried within it an unavoidable tension between “science as the vehicle of cognition and political, economic, and speculative interest.”⁷¹ Hence, he asserted that “what we call Marxism is partly an analysis of a given society and partly a theory of the socialist struggle.”⁷² In other words, Bernstein admonished his comrades that, when using the term “scientific socialism,” they had to “bear in mind that we can only refer to the *theoretical* foundations of

⁶⁵ Eduard Bernstein, “Noch etwas zu Endziel und Bewegung: Ein Brief an Otto Lang,” in *SM* 3 (1899), p. 504.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Bernstein, “Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?,” p. 63. See also, “Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft,” in *SM* 5 (1901), pp. 597–608; “Der Kernpunkt des Streites,” pp. 777–785; “Bildung, Wissenschaft und Partei,” in *SM* 11 (1907), pp. 706–712; and “Wissenschaft, Werturteile und Partei,” in *SM* 16 (1912), pp. 1,407–1,415.

⁶⁷ Bernstein, “Drei Antworten auf ein Inquisitorium,” in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, vol. III, p. 10; “An meine sozialistischen Kritiker,” p. 7.

⁶⁸ Bernstein, “Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft,” p. 603; “Der Kernpunkt des Streites,” pp. 780–781.

⁶⁹ Bernstein, “Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?,” pp. 65–67.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷² Bernstein, “Classenkampf-Dogma und Classenkampf-Wirklichkeit,” in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, vol. III, p. 133.

socialist *striving* and socialist demands.”⁷³ A “socialist” organization of collective social action always aimed at “something beyond that of which we have positive experience.”⁷⁴ Therefore, in its dependence on a “transcendental, moral ideal,” socialism was never free of “speculative idealism.”⁷⁵

In Bernstein’s model, socialism could no longer be explained solely as an objective formation characterized by the dialectical unfolding of economic “Being” toward its inherent *telos*: “[T]he proof of ‘the immanent necessity of socialism’ cannot be supplied without resorting to transcendental deductions, making demands for ‘scientific socialism’ . . . not only unfounded but also objectionable.”⁷⁶ Once again seeking to “legitimate” his attack on Hegelian teleology, Bernstein resorted to a casual remark made by Engels in an interview for the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro*: “We [Marxist socialists] don’t have a final goal. We are evolutionists and we don’t intend to dictate ultimate laws to humanity. Prejudiced opinions regarding the detailed organization of the future society? You won’t find a trace of that among us.”⁷⁷ But unlike his mentor, Bernstein identified such an “evolutionary socialism” with a *transcendental* ideal guiding the movement and reflected in a particular social *principle* whose progressive realization could only *approach* this *ideal* of a cooperative social order: “The final goal is only possible as a principle. Only as a principle does the goal become real, pervading the socialist movement at any given moment.”⁷⁸

Inspired by F. A. Lange’s neo-Kantian use of “regulative ideas,” like the “principle of cooperation,”⁷⁹ Bernstein consciously rejected the teleological Marxism underlying Bebel’s revolutionary *attentisme* which promoted the passive attitude of merely awaiting the collapse of a doomed system and the inevitable realization of an immanent goal. Conversely, understood as a theory of reform stimulating political *action*, Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism aimed at restoring the lost unity between theory and practice. Defined as a *principle* of cooperation, the socialist goal could not be conjured up *a priori*, but was critically informed by the political struggle of the movement. However, as his neo-Kantian friends were quick to point out, here Bernstein compromised the transcendental

⁷³ Bernstein, “Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?,” p. 65.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Here, Bernstein is obviously indebted to Lange’s (1875) proposition that, “ideas . . . don’t claim higher truths, but their opposite: the full and complete renunciation of any theoretical validity in the realm of an externally-directed cognition” (p. 54).

⁷⁵ Bernstein, “Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?,” p. 67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷⁷ Friedrich Engels, “Interview in *Le Figaro*” (May 8, 1893), in *MEW* 22, p. 542.

⁷⁸ Bernstein, “A Statement,” in *MS*, p. 193. See also Eduard Bernstein, “Noch etwas Endziel und Bewegung” in *SM* 4 (1900), p. 505.

⁷⁹ F. A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus*, vol. II (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 998.

character of the ideal by allowing “external” factors to influence its content. On the other hand, this “philosophical weakness” (in Kantian terms) allowed for Bernstein’s emphasis on political *praxis* – the privileging of the daily detail work (*Kleinarbeit*) of the *movement* over metaphysical goals.⁸⁰

Despite its clear connection to enlightenment rationalism, Bernstein’s epistemology never successfully bridged the severe tensions between the skepticist and radical-idealist strains in Kant’s thought. A “critical” destroyer of Marxist dogma armed with scores of statistics, Bernstein assaulted the very “metaphysical” and teleological postulates that might serve as the standards for crucial normative and ethical judgments.⁸¹ At the same time, however, he realized the importance of idealist categories in providing an external referent that would guide the political agent in making both ethical and “practical” choices. But, as pointed out above, Bernstein’s *ad hoc* transcendental “standpoint of the socialist ideal” lacked the epistemological status of Kant’s *a priori* categories of judgment, thus undermining the philosophical imperative for a cooperative community of co-legislators – Kant’s celebrated notion of a “kingdom of ends.”⁸²

Politically, Bernstein’s empirical emphasis and the ensuing privileging of the “movement” made it extremely difficult for him to adjudicate among various claims. After all, without *a priori* transcendental standards or ultimate goals, conflicting “ethical” ideals might arise from the daily struggles of the movement, and a prioritizing of these competing imperatives might occur on the basis of purely *strategic* considerations. As a result, political decision-making could become defined by mere political exigency, protecting party technocrats speaking the language of “Bernsteinian practical ethics” from ethical–transcendental criticism.⁸³ Bernstein’s good intentions notwithstanding, his epistemological stance indeed resulted in the SPD *Praktiker*’s excuse to open the door to an instrumentalism whose “principles” conflicted with Kantian moral imperatives. As a result, “practical reason” lost its action-guiding function, and instrumentalist objectives such as immediate electoral success and the expansion of the party bureaucracy became exempt from ethical criticism. Part 3 of this study will address this problem in more detail.

Philosophically, Bernstein’s epistemological dualism seemed to pre-

⁸⁰ Bernstein, “Der Revisionismus in der Sozialdemokratie,” in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 106; “Noch etwas zu Endziel und Bewegung,” p. 503; “Nach zwei Fronten,” in *NZ* 17.2 (1898/99), p. 851.

⁸¹ For crucial distinctions between various forms of “ethical relativism” in Marxist thought, see Pfeffer, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*, pp. 8–9, 80–114, 169–195.

⁸² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated by H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 100–101.

⁸³ See Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 56–63.

vent the possibility of any contact between science and socialism, thereby reducing the status of the latter once again to that of a mere ethical vision. The problem was obvious: how, after Marx's groundbreaking critique of classical political economy, could Bernstein allow himself to "regress" to the utopian thinking of a Charles Fourier or a Robert Owen? In short, how could he maintain his philosophical dualism and still allow for a fruitful interaction between social science and socialism?⁸⁴

First and foremost, Bernstein had to explain the relationship between cognition and interest in such a way that permitted at least *some* overlap between these two formerly autonomous spheres. Ironically, the anti-Hegelian Bernstein ended up suggesting a dialectical relationship between cognition and interest, and, by extension, between socialism and science, that avoided "unprincipled, raw-empirical experimentation on one hand, and sectarian indoctrination on the other."⁸⁵ Herein lies the central problem of his life-long theoretical quest for a socialist "middle way": how can German social democracy formulate a "principled reformism" that would be reflected in democratically constituted forms of political and economic self-government? To put the matter in Rousseauian terms, Bernstein was engaged in the philosophical attempt to "bring together what right permits with what interest prescribes so that justice and utility are in no way divided."⁸⁶

Bernstein's arguments were based on the following consideration: if the realization of the "socialist goal" was dependent on active subjects capable of both knowing and expressing economic and ideal interests, then the socialist project – understood in Marxian terms as the transformation of capitalist society into a society characterized by a collectivist economy – required both the "is" of scientific information, and the "ought" of the moral will. For Bernstein, the "lack of absolute certainty" inherent in any conceivable social theory did not preclude the necessary task of outlining a program that attempted to sketch the "probable future developments in society" – as long as it was generally understood that such predictions were "always to a certain degree utopian."⁸⁷ While the socialist movement could not subjugate science, its representatives surely appreciated the value of scientific knowledge. The point, then, was to "utilize science in choosing appropriate means and methods," and to "reassess particular [socialist] strategies according to scientific findings."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Bernstein, "Der Kernpunkt des Streits," p. 784.

⁸⁵ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 89.

⁸⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated and introduced by Maurice Cranston (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1968), p. 49.

⁸⁷ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 67.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73; "Der Kernpunkt des Streites," p. 785.

Predictably, Kautsky balked at Bernstein's philosophy of science. Accusing him of setting up a strawman – "the primitive scientific standpoint of the Chinese" – Kautsky claimed that Marxism's scientific self-understanding had always included an acknowledgment of the hypothetical status of its predictions. But like any other science, socialist theory was perfectly justified in deducing "unknown" developments from existing phenomena without losing its scientific character.⁸⁹ So far, so good. A few pages further, however, Kautsky ended up contradicting his previous arguments by referring to historical materialism as the "science" underlying the claims of the Erfurt Program, which "proved" that "the victorious proletariat, by natural necessity, *must* strive to replace capitalist production with a new mode of production."⁹⁰

Obviously, Bernstein's understanding of "scientific" socialism differed dramatically from Kautsky's in its recognition of epistemological limits. Bernstein's "science" was designed to serve the labor movement by providing reliable empirical information about the actual development of capitalist society. Putting himself squarely within the "positivist school of philosophy and sociology," he insisted that without such scientific guidance, all political action would remain empty, just as purely scientific assertions without subjective value judgments were bound to remain blind.⁹¹ This implied that the party was responsible for providing both a climate of scientific openness and the ideological coherence of a partisan organization.

Thus, Bernstein was realistic enough to value "strong party discipline" as "an indispensable element of political movements."⁹² Expressing the ethical will of the labor movement, the party's political principles and resolutions deserved the unreserved loyalty of the entire membership.⁹³ As soon as the labor movement entered the political arena as a partisan,

⁸⁹ Karl Kautsky, "Problematischer gegen wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus," in *NZ* 19.2 (1900/01), pp. 355–364.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 359–360. Kautsky (1906) repeated these claims in his well-known study, *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, translated by John B. Asken as *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* (Chicago: Kerr, 1907). He insisted that "scientific socialism" was to be understood as the "scientific inquiry into the laws of development and motion of the social organism for the purpose of gaining knowledge of the necessary tendencies and goals of the proletarian class struggle" (p. 141).

⁹¹ *ES*, p. 40; "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," pp. 65–66. See also, Thomas Meyer, "Wissenschaft und Sozialismus bei Marx, in der Konzeption Eduard Bernsteins und in der Gegenwart," in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, p. 262.

⁹² Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 74; "Parteidisziplin und Überzeugungstreue," in *SM* 5 (1901), p. 846; "Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision," pp. 20–25; "Parteidisziplin," in *SM* 14 (1910), p. 1,216.

⁹³ For Bernstein's list of "legitimate" party demands, see Bernstein, "Vom Wesen des Sozialismus," in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, vol. II, p. 45.

socialism became a matter of ethical conviction and had to give up all pretense at being scientific: "This is at the core of its [the movement's] purpose, since its primary [political] task does not lie in the realization of scientific postulates."⁹⁴ At the same time, however, social democracy still had an obligation to guarantee its members' right to access and utilize the scientific method as the empirical basis for strategic action.⁹⁵

In Bernstein's opinion, the crucial imperative of maintaining scientific openness was clearly violated by the "dogmatism" of the Erfurt Program, which demanded for its Marxist doctrine "the same infallibility that the Catholic Church has bestowed upon the Pope."⁹⁶ Thus, orthodox Marxists actually hindered the crucial process of open scientific inquiry, or, at the least, rejected important empirical findings of "bourgeois" scientists on "metaphysical" grounds. As a result, Bernstein openly denounced the term "scientific socialism" as an "oxymoron," and offered instead "critical socialism," a phrase coined by the Italian socialist, Antonio Labriola.⁹⁷ According to Bernstein, "scientific socialism" could be properly employed only "when used in a critical sense as a postulate or a program . . . Thus, it [socialism] merely utilizes the scientific method to give power and direction to its own will."⁹⁸ Indeed, socialist theory could be "scientific" only "insofar as its propositions are acceptable to any objective, disinterested non-socialist."⁹⁹

Bernstein took it to be his intellectual duty to restore socialism to its proper meaning by following Kant's critical method and drawing the proper lines of demarcation between socialism as a sociopolitical doctrine dealing with an uncertain future and sociology as "applied social science."¹⁰⁰ Stressing his resolve to defend his views even against "the vast army of [Marxist] orthodoxy," he repeatedly warned that, "Confusion about this dividing line can . . . lead to errors, omissions, and faulty deductions in public policy issues . . . and may provoke theoretically rigid attempts to make socialism dependent on 'proofs' of its immanent necessity. Such effort can never coincide with the scientific method."¹⁰¹

At the 1912 Second German Sociology Conference in Berlin, Bernstein passionately defended Max Weber's neo-Kantian arguments in favor of a "value-free social science" against the criticism of the party press.¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 73.

⁹⁵ Bernstein, "Bildung, Wissenschaft und Partei," p. 712.

⁹⁶ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 74.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–79. ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹⁹ Bernstein, "Der Kernpunkt des Streites," p. 782.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 784.

¹⁰¹ Bernstein, "Idealismus, Kampftheorie, und Wissenschaft," p. 608.

¹⁰² Bernstein, "Wissenschaft, Werturteil und Partei," pp. 1,409–1,411. Max Weber's seminal article, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," which proceeds along Bernstein's arguments, appeared only three years after his crucial essays on this topic.

Rejecting the standard interpretation of Marxist socialism as a unified, consistent system, he agreed with Weber's "bourgeois-liberal" position demanding that all sociopolitical phenomena – as far as they were subjects of scientific inquiry – should be treated in a causal, value-free manner, detached from the "dogmatism" of partisan concerns.¹⁰³

The detachment of science from transcendental value judgments or tendencies is not simply a formal or methodological matter, but a question of eminently practical significance. Here lies the strongest argument in favor of scientific freedom . . . Scientific research is not free if it becomes subject to certain considerations that do not arise from within its own logic. A political party interested in building its great social goals in accordance with scientific knowledge of society's developing forces and tendencies must concede to its social scientists the absolute right of free inquiry. Only such freedom enhances the chances of achieving correct results. Ultimately, then, the securing of scientific freedom is not merely a question of toleration, but a highly practical matter for a party that is interested in promoting scientific knowledge of economic tendencies.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, Bernstein's theoretical concerns once again culminated in the question of *practice*; he viewed Kautsky's and Bebel's stubborn attachment to "speculative metaphysics" not only as intellectually unsound, but as a threat to the future political viability of the labor movement. If, in the name of a "proletarian vantage point," the party discouraged its members from initiating "value-free inquiries into empirically verifiable social correlations,"¹⁰⁵ then socialist theory would be reduced to a purely defensive dogma. In order to preserve its practical relevance, social democracy had to return to a critical-empiricist method of social research. In fact, by keeping a watchful eye on new empirical developments, the labor movement might actually end up rectifying its deceptive claims regarding the relationship between political theory and strategic action, thus keeping alive the crucial task of permanently revising socialist theory.

Ethics and historical materialism

The new meaning of socialism conveyed in Bernstein's revisionist writings reversed Engels' triumphant claim that socialism had been transformed from a "mere ideal" into a historical necessity. Since socialism could never be purely "scientific," there was only "one specific 'socialist' element in socialist theory: its all-pervasive *ethics* and its conception of

¹⁰³ Bernstein, "Wissenschaft, Werturteil und Partei," p. 1,419.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1,411, 1,415.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1,411; "Bildung, Wissenschaft und Partei," p. 707; and "Idealismus, Kampftheorie und Wissenschaft," p. 606.

justice.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, by elevating morality and law/right (*Recht*) to more than mere historical categories reflecting primary processes at their economic base, Bernstein was implicitly attacking what R. G. Peffer calls “moral historicism” – the view that “whatever social structures have evolved or whatever social structures will evolve are, *ipso facto*, morally justified.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, Bernstein’s philosophy of science blended seamlessly into his critique of Marx’s economic determinism: “No one will deny that the most important part in the foundation of Marxism, the basic law that, so to speak, penetrates the whole system is . . . the materialist conception of history. In principle, Marxism stands or falls with this theory; and insofar as it suffers modification, the relationship of the other parts to each other will be affected.”¹⁰⁸

At the height of the revisionist controversy, Bernstein left no doubt that he considered Marx’s method faulty and in need of repair: “The formula of historical materialism, as passed down by Marx and Engels, is not really up to task and needs supplementation.”¹⁰⁹ In particular, he objected to its “obvious lack of subtlety,” which was responsible for the “one-sided emphasis on economic elements” that had misled the founders into “making a variety of social prognoses which, in their old form, are simply out of touch with our time.”¹¹⁰ Here, Bernstein’s critique approaches that of Karl Popper, who has pointed out that, “it is clear enough that the theory [of historical materialism] depends largely on the possibility of correct historical prophecy.”¹¹¹

But as was the case in his philosophy of science, Bernstein denied that his reinterpretation of historical materialism amounted to a wholesale refutation of Marxism. Arguing that his theoretical initiative was consistent with a “consequential development of Marx’s scientific work,”¹¹² he once again refused to draw the full consequences of his revisionist critique. For example, he never owned up to the fact that his comprehensive proposals aimed at the “modernization of Marxist socialism” were bound to lead to an outright abandonment of crucial elements in Marxist

¹⁰⁶ Bernstein, “Der Kernpunkt des Streites,” p. 782.

¹⁰⁷ Peffer, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*, p. 212.

¹⁰⁸ *PS*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Eduard Bernstein, “Der Marx-Cult und das Recht der Revision,” in *SM* 9 (1903), p. 258.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), p. 205. Several authors have elaborated on the close relationship between Bernstein’s philosophy of science and Karl Popper’s “Critical Rationalism.” See, for example, Frithjof Spreer, “Bernstein, Max Weber und das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Politik in der Gegenwartsdiskussion,” in Heiman and Meyer, *Bernstein und der Demokratische Sozialismus*, pp. 274–290; and Robert Steigerwald, *Bürgerliche Philosophie und Revisionismus im imperialistischen Deutschland* (Berlin: Akademie, 1980).

¹¹² Bernstein, “An meine sozialistischen Kritiker,” p. 4.

theory. There are some obvious reasons for why he hesitated to acknowledge his decisive break with Marxism. For one, he had convinced himself of the legitimacy of his selective, “evolutionary” reading of Marxist socialism – a perspective that corresponded more closely to the changing conditions of modernity. Secondly, having dedicated his life entirely to the political cause of the labor movement, he realized that a final break with its dominant ideology would leave him without a viable political base. Finally, there was also the frequently neglected personal factor: his strong feelings of “filial piety” toward Marx and Engels, which made it extremely difficult for him to push his arguments to their logical conclusion.¹¹³ Repeatedly asserting that he was simply working out a revision of Marxist theory already begun years ago by Friedrich Engels, Bernstein produced what he considered to be “convincing evidence” to support his case.

Had not Engels redefined his understanding of “revolution” by insisting that the “so-called socialist society” was not a fixed concept, but a constantly changing and evolving social phenomenon, making “us [socialists] all evolutionists”?¹¹⁴ Moreover, in his harsh condemnation of the SPD’s “Youngsters” faction, had Engels not explicitly stated that dogmatic applications of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* principles to any historical context were rooted in an overly simplistic understanding of Marx’s method?¹¹⁵ Likewise, didn’t the “General” temper the revolutionary fervor of the French Labor Party by warning them against “moving too close to the antiquated principles of Blanquism”?¹¹⁶ Indeed sounding thoroughly “revisionist,” Engels had contested a rigid conception of Marxism: “[T]he whole Marxist conception is not a doctrine, but a method. There are no instant dogmas, only points of reference for further investigation and the method for this investigation.”¹¹⁷

Moreover, Bernstein didn’t overlook the fact that Engels was ultimately forced to admit that overly “deterministic” interpretations of Marx’s method offered by the “Youngsters” were actually made possible by the existing unstable compromise in Marxist theory between the alleged primacy of causal determination and the efficacy of human volition. Given the explosive growth of the German labor movement in the years after Marx’s death, Engels realized the importance of working out a more precise exposition of the historical-materialist method. At the very core of

¹¹³ Bernstein to Kautsky (November 9, 1898), *Adler A.* Here, Bernstein openly admitted that his “filial piety” toward Marx and Engels often prevented him from giving free rein to his criticism. Hence, his complaint: “How is such an [outspoken] critique possible without injury to the elders?”

¹¹⁴ Engels, “Interview with *Le Figaro*” (May 8, 1893), *MEW* 22, p. 542.

¹¹⁵ Engels to Schmidt (August 5, 1890), *MEW* 37, pp. 436–437.

¹¹⁶ Engels to Paul Lafargue (June 27, 1893), *MEW* 39, p. 89.

¹¹⁷ Engels to Sombart (March 11, 1895), *MEW* 39, p. 428.

his efforts lurked the vexing philosophical problem of human "free will." In his influential 1886 study, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels implicitly raised this pivotal question: if the ultimate causes of historical events were neither found in philosophical ideology (Hegel) nor in the undialectical "old materialism" of Dühring and Büchner, then how could one conceptualize the primary historical structures in terms of which humans have motives and act?

Responding in "dialectical" fashion, Engels had argued that it was impossible to explain what happened in history by appealing exclusively to personal motives which often seemed to account for the actions of individuals: "The many individual wills active in history produce, for the most part, results other than those intended . . . Their motives in relation to the total result are therefore likely [to be] only of secondary significance."¹¹⁸ While this explanation successfully set limits to sheer voluntarism and the idealist *credo* of an "autonomy of human consciousness," the exact relationship between ultimate causation operating at the economic base and human will remained unresolved.

In order to defend his model of historical materialism more effectively against both idealist and materialist critics, Engels was forced to enhance the causal significance of the ideological superstructure. However, this meant that he had to "revise" Marx's powerful model of monocausal determination in a more idealist direction, acknowledging the presence of "substantial holes" in his old conception of history: "[W]e [Marx and Engels] have neglected the formal side in favor of the content: the mode in which mental representations arise."¹¹⁹ Suddenly, in Engels' famous letters of the 1890s on historical materialism, Marx's method became a far more complicated model of explaining social change than previously depicted: "According to the materialist conception of history, the production and reproduction of real life are the determining factors only in the last instance . . . If somebody twists it into meaning that the economic factor is the only determining factor, then the previous sentence is turned into a meaningless, abstract, and absurd phrase."¹²⁰ Despite Engels' reaffirmation of "economic necessity," it is clear that he enhanced the significance of the ideological and legal superstructure.

Yet, Engels probably wouldn't have accepted the charge that he was "revising" historical materialism; in his mind, he was simply defining his and Marx's earlier views with "more clarity and greater precision."¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International, 1935), p. 62.

¹¹⁹ Engels to Mehring (July 14, 1893), *MEW* 39, p. 96.

¹²⁰ Engels to Joseph Bloch (September 21, 1890), *MEW* 37, p. 463.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 463. This is also the thesis of S. D. Bailey, "The Revision of Marxism," in *The Review of Politics* 16 (1954), p. 452.

Still, it is not difficult to see that it took Bernstein only a small change in emphasis to move from Engels' model of "infinite groups of contradicting forces" producing a "definite historical result that wasn't willed by anybody,"¹²² to his revisionist proposition asserting that it was "neither possible nor necessary to give socialism a purely materialistic basis."¹²³ In other words, Bernstein readmitted political and ideological forces *along-side* purely economic factors, thereby turning Engels' determining "last instance" into the pluralism of parallel acting forces, all potentially capable of causing significant social effects.¹²⁴ In Bernstein's new conception, economic causes created the structural presuppositions for the acceptance of certain ideas, but how they rose to prominence and what particular forms they took depended on a vast number of interacting tendencies:

Whoever employs the materialist conception of history nowadays is duty bound to use it in its most developed and not in its original form. This means that, in addition to the development and the influence of the forces of production and the relations of production, he is duty bound to take full account of the legal and moral concepts, the historical and religious traditions of every epoch, geographical and other natural influences, which include the nature of man himself and his intellectual dispositions.¹²⁵

Although economic "laws" were the theoretical and methodological preconditions for a consequent materialist-dialectical explanation of sociohistorical processes, they coexisted with consciousness and human will. The latter were powerful causal factors in their own right, which, at certain historical junctures, could even eclipse the force of economic tendencies.¹²⁶ Again, Bernstein's model resembles Karl Popper's critical rationalism worked out decades later. Like Popper, Bernstein objected to the historicist mistake of confusing unconditional prophesies with conditional scientific predictions. Popper put it well: "... historicists *overlook the dependence of trends on initial conditions*. They operate with trends as if they were unconditional, like laws. Their confusion of laws with trends makes them believe in trends which are unconditional (and therefore general); or, as we may say, in '*absolute trends*.'"¹²⁷

Likewise, Bernstein insisted that the study of capitalist development required a historically specific assessment of existing relations between subjective factors and economic forces, based on exact data drawn from

¹²² Engels to Bloch (September 21, 1890), *MEW* 37, p. 464.

¹²³ *PS*, p. 200.

¹²⁴ See Grebing, *Der Revisionismus: Von Bernstein bis zum "Prager Frühling"*, p. 41.

¹²⁵ *PS*, p. 16.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹²⁷ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 128.

empirical research. Following his own statistical model situated within a general evolutionist framework, Bernstein suggested that modern capitalist society was “far richer than earlier societies in ideologies which are not determined by economics or by nature working as an economic force.”¹²⁸ As the growing productive capabilities of society fulfilled immediate economic needs to an ever greater extent, ethical factors widened their “scope for independent activity,” thus dramatically gaining in causal significance.¹²⁹

Given the proletariat’s material position in the capitalist order, Bernstein could not ignore the importance of economic factors. Yet, he consciously resisted the materialist reductionism of orthodox Marxists. Instead, he sought to connect interests and ideas as the “opposing, but interdependent poles” of a wide array of historical driving forces.¹³⁰ Offering a subtle interpretation of “emancipatory interests,” Bernstein claimed that the interests guiding the working class’ political actions were always mediated by individual and collective forms of “consciousness,” thus representing “thought reflexes, conclusions erected on mental syntheses of mediated facts and therefore inevitably colored by ideology.”¹³¹ The very existence of mentally mediated “common interests” as the spring of political action implied that, at times, the proletariat sacrificed its “selfish, material interests” directed at economic advantage to a “moral ideal” like solidarity, or other “feeling[s] of common humanity and the recognition of social interdependence.”¹³² Thus, Bernstein concluded, “The interest which Marxist socialism presupposes is, from the outset, furnished with a social or ethical element, and to that extent it is not only a *rational* but also a *moral* interest, so that ideality in the moral sense of the term is inherent in it.”¹³³

Here, Bernstein explicitly recognized the *active* role of a system of values in relation to the scientific means–end chain. The realization of ultimate socialist values was not simply dictated by economic necessity, but was also a matter of active imagination, moral will, and conscious choice. In short, superstructural elements – Lange’s “regulative ideals” – proved to be of great significance for the social democratic project of social change. The daily struggle of the labor movement for social betterment gave rise to

¹²⁸ PS, p. 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³⁰ Eduard Bernstein, *Wesen und Ansichten des bürgerlichen Radikalismus* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1915), pp. 5–6, 32.

¹³¹ Bernstein, “The Realistic and Ideological Moments in Socialism,” in MS, p. 234.

¹³² Eduard Bernstein, “Idee und Interesse in der Geschichte” (1924), in *Bernstein A*, A53; “Was ist Sozialismus” (1918), in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 157. See also, Eduard Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie Einst und Jetzt* (Jena: Diederichs, 1911), pp. 44–45.

¹³³ Bernstein, “The Realistic and Ideological Moments of Socialism,” in MS, p. 233.

a sense of solidarity anchored in both *praxis* and the *ethical-legal consciousness* of workers – a mighty factor driving social development.¹³⁴ According to Bernstein, “no action on the part of the masses” could have a “lasting effect without a moral impetus.”¹³⁵

While his rehabilitation of ethics opened up the possibility of a socialist politics of human agency, Bernstein declined to follow Kant’s lead in positing the existence of an abstract “moral law” which obligated all individuals in civil society independent of their social position:

Although we need to acknowledge the importance of ethical factors in socialism, they are only of secondary importance. Modern socialism does not derive its defining demands from an abstract idea of justice. Rather, it bases justice on a historical justification apparent in the concrete economic and social conditions of our present era . . . Only insofar as socialist theory, according to its own theoretical principles, is capable of proving the decline of capitalism can it be considered scientifically sound. This is the test for the correctness of theory.¹³⁶

Thereby, he explicitly distanced himself from those neo-Kantian socialists “who would like to dissolve Marxism into pure ethics.”¹³⁷ Unable to escape the old tension between empiricist skepticism and radical idealism, he sought to discourage “extreme” conceptions of history that opted either for an “objective” economic determinism or a “subjective” moral law.¹³⁸ Insisting that subjective factors emerged as structure-creating forces only within the framework of economic development and its ensuing class relations, Bernstein modified Marx’s historical materialism into what he called the “economic conception of history” – an expression coined by the German liberal sociologist Ernst Barth.¹³⁹

An economic conception of history need not mean that only economic forces, only economic motives, are recognized. It need only mean that economics constitute the ever-recurring decisive form, the pivot on which the great movements in history turn. To the words “materialist conception of history” cling all the misunderstandings which are attached to the concept of materialism.¹⁴⁰

From a Kautsky–Luxemburg orthodox perspective, of course, Bernstein had entirely failed to grasp the vital connection between the *weltan-*

¹³⁴ Bernstein, “Drei Antworten auf ein Inquisitorium,” in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, pp. 10–11.

¹³⁵ Bernstein, “The Realistic and Ideological Moments in Socialism,” in *MS*, p. 240.

¹³⁶ Eduard Bernstein, *Die heutige Sozialdemokratie in Theorie und Praxis* (Munich: Birk, 1906), pp. 6–7.

¹³⁷ Eduard Bernstein, “Tugan Baranowsky als Sozialist,” in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 28 (1909), p. 786.

¹³⁸ Bernstein, “Der Marx-Cultus und das Recht zur Revision,” p. 257.

¹³⁹ Bernstein, “Der Revisionismus in der Sozialdemokratie,” in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 100; and *PS*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

schaulich-philosophical and political-economic explanation of the sociohistorical process, thus “reverting” to the fuzzy “eclecticism” of the pre-Marxist “petit bourgeois socialist” who defined socialism from within the confines of an “uncritical” positivism. In their opinion, Bernstein’s philosophy of science restored the autonomy of the subject at the expense of a Hegelian subject-object identity which emphasized the historicity of all social structures. According to Kautsky and Luxemburg, Bernstein’s empiricist bird’s-eye view depersonalized and dehistoricized the social observer, while at the same time reducing objects to petrified “facts” that veiled the dialectical processes of historical becoming.

A few decades later, Georg Lukács, too, would charge Bernstein with “flattening the Marxist method,” by displaying the empiricist’s inability to grasp the speculative totality of social phenomena. If “facts” were excluded from social totality, they became “inflexible” and “dead.”¹⁴¹ In Bernstein’s blueprint, the nature of man’s relationship to the material world was no longer accurately captured. Marx’s celebrated notion of a dynamic “ensemble of social relations” had but turned into a pathetic “ensemble of facts.”¹⁴² As his Marxist critics saw it, Bernstein had slipped back into a static Cartesianism that accepted empirical data at face value and allowed him to anchor socialism in the “eternal” moral values of liberalism, while transforming historically conditioned categories into timeless expressions of ethical “truth.”¹⁴³ Luxemburg acerbically noted that the “Father of Revisionism” had exhibited the same “false consciousness” as those “ethical socialists” whose bourgeois attachment to Kant’s liberalism had blinded them to the philosophical superiority of Hegelian dialectics. As far as “Red Rosa” was concerned, Bernstein and his “anxious ethical comrades should drown in the moral absolutes of their beloved *Critique of Practical Reason*.”¹⁴⁴

Socialism with a Kantian face?

Her sarcasm and her false identification of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism with a traditional “neo-Kantian” position notwithstanding, Luxemburg was right in noting that Bernstein’s reconceptualization of socialism had to be understood as part of the ongoing reaction against Hegel’s grand speculative philosophy and a short-lived celebration of mechanical materialism at the middle of the century. By the 1870s,

¹⁴¹ Lukács, “What is Orthodox Marxism?,” in *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 1–26.

¹⁴² See Hans-Peter Jäger, *Eduard Bernsteins Panorama: Versuch, den Revisionismus zu deuten* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1982), p. 122.

¹⁴³ Bernstein boldly affirmed Kautsky’s judgment in Bernstein to Vorländer (August 4, 1899), *Bernstein A*, D804.

¹⁴⁴ Luxemburg cited in Peter Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford UP, 1969), p. 12.

German philosophy witnessed the gradual rise of the neo-Kantian movement. The two main neo-Kantian schools – the critical-idealist Marburg School represented by Hermann Cohen, Karl Vorländer, and Paul Natorp; and the more historicist and intuitionist Heidelberg School of Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Georg Simmel – began to attract influential followers among national-liberals and left-liberals alike.¹⁴⁵ Based on Kant's stipulation of a transcendental moral law, prominent social democratic followers of the Marburg School, like Kurt Eisner, Franz Staudinger, Konrad Schmidt, Karl Vorländer, Max Adler, and Eduard David, eagerly sought to fill the conceptual framework of critical idealism with Marx's political and economic analysis, urging their party to marry Kantian ethics with Marxist political economy.¹⁴⁶

To a certain extent, Bernstein, too, joined in their rallying cry of "Back to Kant," proclaiming that, "The modern proletarian movement fights its emancipatory struggle under the banner of Kant, not Hegel."¹⁴⁷ But unlike his neo-Kantian comrades, Bernstein meant to evoke the epistemological skepticism of Kant's critical philosophy as a reminder for orthodox Marxists not to fall prey to rigid dogmatism:

The method of this great philosopher [Kant] can serve as a pointer to the satisfying solution to our problem. Of course we don't have to slavishly adhere to Kant's form, but we must match his method to the nature of our own subject [socialism], displaying the same critical spirit. Our critique must be directed against both a skepticism that undermines all theoretical thought, and a dogmatism that relies on ready-made formulas.¹⁴⁸

As pointed out above, Bernstein remained aloof from a Kantianism that sought to provide a systematic foundation of a socialist ethic. Rather, he modeled his own ethical interpretation of socialism on F. A. Lange's psychological reading of Kant, which drew heavily on the British tradition

¹⁴⁵ For an excellent overview of neo-Kantian socialism, see Timothy Keck, "The Marburg School and Ethical Socialism," in *The Social Science Journal* 14.3 (1977), pp. 105–119; Thomas Willey, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978); Helmut Holthey, *Cohen and Natorp*, 2 vols. (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1986); and Harry van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988).

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Kurt Eisner, "Kant" in *Kurt Eisners Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1919); Franz Staudinger (a. k. a. "Sadi Gunter"), "Bernstein und die Wissenschaft," in *NZ* 17.2 (1898/99), pp. 644–653, and "Kant und der Sozialismus: Ein Gedenkwort zu Kants Todestage," in *SM* 8 (1904), pp. 103–114; Konrad Schmidt, "Über die geschichtsphilosophischen Ansichten Kants," in *SM* 7 (1903), pp. 683–691; Karl Vorländer, *Kant und Marx: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie des Sozialismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926); Max Adler, *Marxistische Probleme* (Berlin: Dietz, 1922).

¹⁴⁷ Eduard Bernstein, "Tugan Baranowskys Marx-Kritik," in *Dokumente des Sozialismus* 5 (1905), p. 421.

¹⁴⁸ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 64.

of empiricism.¹⁴⁹ Unlike the Marburgers, who anchored their socialism exclusively in the categorical imperative, Lange and Bernstein rejected any methodological foundation of ethical idealism. This was reflected in their positivistic interpretation of Kant's "critical method," which strictly limited science to the establishment of regularities between empirically observable entities. Following Lange's theory, Bernstein's brand of "neo-Kantianism" was not the source of his empiricist skepticism, but its consequence.¹⁵⁰

There were indeed a number of crucial differences between Lange's philosophy and Marburger neo-Kantianism.¹⁵¹ For example, Lange denied the *a priori* existence of ideas, thus agnostically rejecting any "scientific" grounding of ideal factors like will or ethics. Interpreting Kant's categories of the understanding as constituents of the human brain, Lange's physiologism avoided Kant's transcendental explanation of the categories as necessary, "rational" or "logical" constructs. Indeed, there was no "systemic" connection between Lange's philosophy and his conception of socialism other than his *ad hoc* stipulation of "noble [socialist] personalities filled with pure idealism."¹⁵²

But Lange and the Marburger socialists reached common ground in their political reformism, interpreting the rise of the labor movement within a general Enlightenment framework that emphasized unilinear progress. Although he lauded *Capital* as an "excellent piece of work," Lange proceeded to separate "Marx's political perspectives and predictions from his theory."¹⁵³ For one, he rejected the Hegelian dialectics at the core of Marx's method as having provided the basis for "the bottomless ocean of metaphysical errors." In addition, Lange insisted that Marx's "dogmatic materialism" needed to be refined from the "standpoint of the ideal."¹⁵⁴ Based on his strict separation of the world into a "realm of science" and a "realm of ideas," Lange claimed that such ethical "ideals" didn't serve to extend one's knowledge but to counteract

¹⁴⁹ PS, p. 210.

¹⁵⁰ See also Robert A. Gorman, "Empirical Marxism," in *History and Theory* 20.4 (1981), p. 409.

¹⁵¹ Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, pp. 294–295. See also Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus: Die deutsche Philosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986); and Hans Martin Sass, "Der Standpunkt des Ideals als kritische Überwindung materialistischer und idealistischer Metaphysik" in Knoll and Schöps, *Friedrich Albert Lange, Leben und Werk*. These authors argue convincingly that by offering a fundamental critique of basic neo-Kantian assumptions, Lange cannot be seen as the precursor or founder of neo-Kantianism, but as an alternative to it (pp. 188–206, 256).

¹⁵² Vorländer cited in Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, p. 294.

¹⁵³ F. A. Lange, *Die Arbeiterfrage*, 5th ed. (Winterthur: Ziegler, 1894), p. 348.

¹⁵⁴ Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus*, p. 54.

materialistic, deterministic assumptions, thereby making room for morality.¹⁵⁵ By now, it should not be difficult to recognize Bernstein's own philosophical position in Lange's epistemology and moral theory.

Soon after his death in 1875, Lange's views were fiercely attacked by his former students, led by the well-known Hermann Cohen.¹⁵⁶ Twenty-five years later, the Marburger socialists battled Bernstein's philosophical "eclecticism" with the same arguments Cohen used against Lange. Stressing the prior role of the knowing subject in the structuring of knowledge, Karl Vorländer vehemently rejected Bernstein's separation of science and ethics. For the Marburgers, Bernstein had obviously been influenced by the "misguided English empiricists and eudaemonistic philosophers" who reduced science to a "crude empiricism" which surrendered the systemic coherence of transcendental standards of ethical judgment, and erroneously defined the end of morality as "the greatest amount of material and moral well-being."¹⁵⁷ Though Vorländer and other social liberals agreed with Bernstein that a universalistic ethics ought to serve as the guide for any socialist politics, they nonetheless insisted that "scientific socialism" was indeed possible and desirable in the form of a socialist ethic constructing and explicating the moral law. In other words, *a priori* principles of reason were revealed in scientific and moral progress in history.

Seen from the perspective of the Marburger socialists, the tension between empiricism and idealism in Bernstein's epistemology was indeed troubling. But this does not mean that Bernstein failed to grasp Kantian philosophical principles.¹⁵⁸ Though an autodidact, he had accumulated basic philosophical knowledge through long years of private study. Obviously, his intellectual efforts hardly made him the equivalent of academically trained philosophers or social scientists. But neither was Friedrich Engels – nor, for that matter, were other prominent party leaders like Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel, and Ignaz Auer. Victor Adler, the Austrian party boss, was a medical doctor who readily admitted to his "ignorance in matters of theory;" V. I. Lenin never finished his academic studies, and even Karl Kautsky openly acknowledged that philosophy had never been his "strong suit."¹⁵⁹ With the exception of Luxemburg and Plekhanov, German social democracy at the turn of the

¹⁵⁵ See Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus*, p. 253.

¹⁵⁶ Hermann Cohen, "Friedrich Albert Lange," in *Philosophie Journal* 37 (1876), p. 378.

¹⁵⁷ Vorländer, *Kant und Marx*, p. 185.

¹⁵⁸ For example, Fletcher (1984) asserts that "it is doubtful whether Bernstein ever acquired a solid grasp of Kant" (p. 131). But as Walther (1981, p. 129), Grebing, (1977, p. 40), and Gustafsson (1972, pp. 113–115) emphasize, Bernstein explicitly linked his critique not to Kant but to F.A. Lange's *Die Arbeiterfrage*.

¹⁵⁹ Karl Kautsky, "Ein Brief über Bernstein an Plechanow," in *Der Kampf* 18 (1925), p. 2.

century was characterized by the weak philosophical background of its main theorists, and, in particular, by a remarkable ignorance regarding Hegelian philosophy.¹⁶⁰

Bernstein's pivotal intellectual achievement – the innovative reconceptualization of the relationship between socialism, ethics, and science that created the theoretical precondition for reconnecting the socialist tradition with its liberal origins – required no more than the acceptance of certain basic Kantian and Fabian philosophical assumptions, and their logical juxtaposition with his political theses.¹⁶¹ Throughout his life, Bernstein, first and foremost, emphasized the *political* ramifications of his theoretical enterprise: the strengthening of an ethical reformism, which, in his opinion, could only be achieved by sacrificing philosophical “system-thinking” to a less coherent but more applicable “eclecticism”:

Eclecticism – selecting from different explanations and ways of dealing with phenomena – is often only the natural reaction against the doctrinaire desire to derive everything from one thing and to treat everything according to one and the same method. Whenever this desire gets out of hand, eclecticism breaks through again and again with elemental force. It is the rebellion of sober reason against the inbuilt tendency of every doctrine to confine thought in a straitjacket.¹⁶²

More than anything, it was his commitment to the liberal paradigm that led to Luxemburg's and Kautsky's charges against Bernstein's “petty-bourgeois opportunism.” In their opinion, he had clearly “betrayed” Marxism by resurrecting precisely the kind of pre-Marxian socialist “eclecticism” against which Kautsky had fought so bitterly his entire life.¹⁶³

No doubt, Bernstein had crossed the fundamental divide separating Marxian socialism and “bourgeois reformism.” He no longer regarded the dichotomy between “liberalism” and “socialism” as useful. Consistent with his philosophical position, Bernstein continued publicly to announce his sympathies for the liberal tradition with its emphasis on freedom, individual autonomy, and human rights.

¹⁶⁰ Steinberg, *Sozialismus und Deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, pp. 56–60.

¹⁶¹ See also, Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, p. 75.

¹⁶² *PS*, p. 18.

¹⁶³ Karl Kautsky, “Karl Kautsky,” in Meiner, *Die Volkswirtschaftslehre*, pp. 19–21.

5 Evolutionary socialism as “organized liberalism”: rethinking economics, state, and democracy

From production to distribution: theories of value

Bernstein’s “Kantian” epistemology undermined the “scientific” relationship between Marxist socialism and science in yet another crucial area: political economy. We must remember that Engels had credited Marx’s “two great discoveries” – the materialist conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalist production through surplus value – with finally transforming “utopian socialism” into a “modern science.”¹ Thus, at the center of the founders’ and Bernstein’s diverging political and economic conceptions was the role of “value” in regulating and reproducing the social structure of capitalism. However, this did not mean that Bernstein advocated a total rejection of Marxist economic theory. True to his “eclectic” leanings, Bernstein once again presented his views on political economy as a “compromise” position designed to incorporate elements from both Marx’s “objectivist” labor theory and the “subjectivist” marginal utility theories of British and Austrian economists such as Stanley Jevons, Carl Menger, and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk.

Bernstein cautiously prefaced his remarks on economic theory by denying the disputes raging over the validity of Marx’s concept of value a central role for socialist theory.² Nonetheless, weighty matters of both political theory and practice were at stake. The labor theory of value had been the starting point of Marx’s celebrated “physiology of the bourgeois system” – the scientific analysis of the inner coherence and vital processes of the capitalist system.³ Put briefly, if Bernstein disagreed with Marx’s

¹ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *MECW* 25, pp. 271, 27.

² Eduard Bernstein, “Arbeitswert oder Nutzwert,” in *Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Sozialismus*, p. 106. See also Eduard Bernstein, “Allerhand Werttheoretisches,” in *Dokumente des Sozialismus* 5 (1905), p. 221; “Das Bleibende am Marxismus,” in *Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 167.

³ Karl Marx, “Theorien über den Mehrwert,” in *MEW* 26, p. 162.

approach, then, by extension, he also had to reject the main arguments of Marx’s analysis of capitalist social relations in *Capital*. If one does this, then the crucial Marxist distinction between liberalism and socialism has indeed lost its theoretical justification.

The obvious starting point from which to unravel Bernstein’s revisionist arguments is the examination of the relationship among the following critical ideas: value, surplus value, and abstract labor. Like the classical British political economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Marx considered the value of commodities to be determined by the human labor incorporated in them. Although Marx accepted some subjective, utilitarian assessments – like those expressed in the idea that a product’s “use value” (utility) partially determined its exchange value – he still insisted that the determining factor of a commodity’s value was the human labor “encapsulated” in the finished product.⁴ The exchange value of a commodity, understood as the “center of gravity for the commodity’s oscillating market price,” ultimately determined the price of the product. Thus, Marx’s value theory clearly made the case for an “objectivist” determination of prices based on production costs; “subjective” or “psychological” factors were a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for price determinations.⁵

But Marx’s economic theory differed from classical political economy in another respect. Ricardo had never asked the question which most interested Marx: under which sociohistorical conditions does the product of labor assume the form of a “commodity?”⁶ In other words, Marx set out to investigate why – under the current capitalist mode of production – unique, subjective human labor appeared as the “value” of exchangeable “things” called commodities.

Therefore, Marx did not regard “value” merely as a quantitative economic category, but also as the expression of underlying social relations. Known as “commodity fetishism,” this problem denotes the process through which social labor is represented in the form of an intrinsic quality of things, which, in turn, *appear* to be endowed with independent, “subjective” qualities as though they were “persons,” impacting on and interacting with “real” people.⁷ Hence, the phenomenon of “commodity fetishism” could be employed as a powerful analytical tool to reveal the alienating character of the *essentially* “in-

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–41.

⁵ See also Lothar F. Neumann, “Die Werttheorie und der Sozialismus bei Marx, Bernstein und in der heutigen Diskussion,” in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, pp. 293–299.

⁶ *C I*, p. 80.

⁷ See Lucio Colletti, “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International,” in *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

verted" capitalist world where "things" rule over "people." Unlike the classical economists, Marx linked the sociohistorical aspect of value formation to the corresponding "bourgeois" ideological expression based upon the capitalist mode of production. Whereas Smith and Ricardo "wrongly" equated the human process of production with "commodity production" – a self-evident necessity imposed by nature itself – Marx's *critique* of political economy (the subtitle of *Capital*!) identified various modes of production as limited sociohistorical phenomena which were always associated with particular forms of ideology and class domination.

Next, Marx analyzed the process of commodity exchange, an operation that obviously required an abstract common denominator rendering the "values" of two different commodities commensurable. In other words, concrete human labor – calculated on the basis of "abstract" equivalents – had to take on the form of "abstract human labor," otherwise they would lose their exchangeability. This crucial abstraction allowed Marx to explain "value" as "mere homogeneous congelations of undifferentiated human labor" – objective, quantitative units standing in for a purely subjective, qualitative process.⁸ Nonetheless, "abstract human labor" was based on real, concrete value, created by real, concrete human labor power. Marx insisted that, despite this necessary "abstraction," he had staked his analytical claims on empirical grounds.

Equipped with his crucial concepts of "value" and "abstract labor," Marx took the final step in uncovering the "secret" of the capitalist production process: the exploitation of the working class in the name of "commutative justice." Put simply, his main argument went as follows: although commodities appeared to be freely exchanged as equivalents in a non-coercive manner, the owners of the means of production were still able to extract "surplus value" from their workers in the form of unpaid labor time. This "hidden exploitation," occurring within the framework of a "fair exchange" on the "free market" was made possible because material needs forced workers to sell, as quickly as possible, their sole exchangeable "commodity" – their ability to perform labor for any capitalist who would hire them for a wage. As R. G. Peffer notes, Marx never gave a clear-cut definition or explication of his concept of exploitation. While he sometimes employed the term in a morally condemnatory fashion, there is considerable debate among the interpreters of his work as to whether this negative moral import is a necessary characteristic of exploitation.⁹

Usually, Marx simply observed that capitalists were in the position of owning enough material goods to sustain themselves without the crucial

⁸ *C I*, p. 38.

⁹ Peffer, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*, p. 137.

labor-power–wage exchange for longer periods of time, a significant advantage which put them in control of the labor market. Their possession of private property allowed them to enter into a contract with workers that purchased labor power at its value – the minimum time necessary to “reproduce workers as workers.” Paying them such a “minimum wage,” the employers then used their “legal control” of the working place and working conditions to compel laborers to produce more. As the crucial political-legal instrument of class domination, the bourgeois state secured the enforcement of the wage contract.

In this way, capital exploited labor while maintaining the *appearance* of commutative justice on the basis of “equivalent exchange” according to the bourgeois-capitalist ideology of “individual liberty.” But Marx placed the origins of workers’ exploitation at the level of *production*, advancing beyond the old mercantilist conceptions of early-nineteenth-century socialists. For example, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had supported the notion of “profit upon alienation,” thereby locating the origin of profit in the difference between selling and buying prices. Equating exploitation with “theft,” Proudhon’s arguments revealed a conflict between exploitation and justice/legality. Conversely, Marx considered modern social inequality in the form of capitalist exploitation occurring as the “logical consequence” of the political-economic system as such, and in accordance with the development of juridical-political “equality.” His occasional moralistic tone notwithstanding, Marx sought to explain exploitation in a descriptive, “scientific” manner. In fact, he deliberately made his theory of exploitation dependent on the “objective” relationship between economic variables operating on the level of production in order to avoid “unscientific” value judgments.¹⁰

Marx’s economic theory thus provided a conceptual framework for explaining exploitation in the “legitimate” scientific language of the nineteenth century: in spite of the existence of liberal-bourgeois institutions guaranteeing *formal* equality, social injustice continued in the form of coerced, unpaid labor (surplus labor) – disguised exploitation based upon *actual* power differentials between classes. Hence, only the abolition of the commodity form – the revolutionary transformation of the source of exploitation *on the level of production* – would lead to subsequent alteration of the ideological-legal state apparatus and the socialist supersession of the ideological principles of “capitalist justice.”

However, as the century drew to a close, Marx’s economic objectivism explaining value as arising solely from productive labor, came under fire from a number of social-liberal and neo-classical liberal economists who

¹⁰ *C I*, p. 194.

had fallen under the spell of rising “subjectivist” marginal utility theories in England and Austria. Regarding the subjective preferences of consumers expressed in utilitarian psychological considerations like “desire” as the crucial element in determining the value of a commodity, marginalists attacked Marx’s “objectivist” labor theory of value, including his highly complex and “faulty” conclusions regarding price formation and falling rates of profit.

Briefly, Marx had argued that surplus value could only be extracted from “variable capital” – labor power – and not from “constant capital” (the means of production).¹¹ As a result, the rate of profit (the ratio of the total sum of the invested capital over surplus-value) should fall as technological innovation caused the share of variable capital in the invested capital to decrease. However, Marx and Engels could not close their eyes to the overwhelming empirical evidence indicating that the average rates of profit in all developed capitalist countries were roughly equal, regardless of specific industry sectors and their concurrent differences regarding their share of variable capital. This vexing problem indicated a serious contradiction between Marx’s fundamental theoretical assumptions and empirical reality. Despite new “solutions” offered in subsequent volumes of *Capital*, this conceptual dilemma remained unresolvable within the confines of a labor theory of value. For example, Bernstein charged that Marx’s new lack of emphasis on the significance of value in the exchange of commodities apparent in volume 3 of *Capital* had led to the formulation of a price theory which undermined the role of labor in price formation, and thus the very *raison d’être* of his economic theory.¹²

The German economist Werner Sombart best expressed the growing concerns of Marx’s liberal critics by concluding that Marx’s concept of value was a purely theoretical construct which did not correspond to any observable sociohistorical formation.¹³ Building on Sombart’s arguments, the well-respected Austrian neo-classical economist, Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, published a long essay which attempted to show that neither a deductive nor an empirical proof of the labor theory of value could be successfully sustained.¹⁴ For marginalists, Marx provided a phenomenology of value whose indeterminate relation to price constitution was never fully acknowledged. In this spirit, Böhm-Bawerk referred

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 199–211.

¹² Eduard Bernstein, “Vorfragen einer Sozialistischen Theorie der Gewerkschaftsbewegung,” in *SM* 10 (1906), p. 843.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of these problems, see Howard and King, *A History of Marxian Economics*, pp. 46–55.

¹⁴ Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, “Karl Marx and the Close of his System,” in Paul Sweezy, ed. *Karl Marx and the Close of his System* (New York: Kelley, 1966).

to Marx's system as a shaky “house of cards,” mired in the speculative categories of Hegelian philosophy.¹⁵ Conversely, marginalists chose to remain within the limits of “price theories,” claiming that discussions centered on the “metaphysical concept of value” yielded but “unscientific” conclusions.

However, whether, as Colletti asserts, the origin of this dispute between Marxist economic theorists and their neo-classical and revisionist critics derived from the latter's profound misunderstanding of Marx's concept of “abstract labor,”¹⁶ or whether it reflected legitimate disagreements over the epistemological and empirical foundations of “value” itself, has remained the subject of long theoretical debates that originated with Sombart's and Böhm-Bawerk's critiques. Such controversies over the analytic merit of the concept of “value” were carried on throughout the twentieth century by socialist economic theorists like Paul Sweezy,¹⁷ Joan Robinson,¹⁸ and their more recent counterparts, Alec Nove, G. A. Cohen, John Roemer, Jon Elster, and other representatives of “analytical Marxism.”¹⁹

Seeking to mediate between the two opposing camps, Bernstein questioned the usefulness of developing a new theories of value. He argued that some arguments of both schools were pertinent to the more important *political* discussion of how to challenge capitalist conditions of economic exploitation.²⁰ He illustrated this eclectic approach to value theory by means of an oft-cited allegory:

Peter and Paul stand before a shop window filled with minerals.

“These are parallel-planed hemihedral crystals,” says Peter.

“These are pyrites,” says Paul.

Which of the two is right?

“Both are right,” says the mineralogist. “Peter's statement refers to form, Paul's to substance.” . . . Translated into the language of political economy, the same can be said about the long quarrel over value theory.²¹

Bernstein believed that Marxist and marginalist concepts of value

¹⁵ Böhm-Bawerk cited in *ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

¹⁶ Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, pp. 79–81.

¹⁷ Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York: Oxford UP, 1946).

¹⁸ Joan Robinson, *An Essay on Marxian Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1949).

¹⁹ See, for example, G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978); Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1982); John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982); Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985); and Ian Steedman, ed. *The Value Controversy* (London: New Left Books, 1981).

²⁰ Bernstein, “Allerhand Werttheoretisches,” pp. 558–559. For Bernstein, the search for an absolute concept of value that would include all determining factors would prove to be a fruitless enterprise.

²¹ Bernstein, “Arbeitswert oder Nutzwert,” pp. 101–102.

addressed two different dimensions of the same problem: "Economic value is androgynous: it contains the element of utility (use-value, demand) and cost of production (labor power). Which of these two aspects determines value? Surely, not one without the other."²² Thus he argued for maintaining Marx's emphasis on human labor as the "substance" of commodities while also accepting the role of marginal utility theory in explaining the "form," or the "magnitude" of value. Standing on their own, however, both theories seemed to Bernstein to be fraught with serious shortcomings. For example, he accused the marginalists of focusing exclusively on utility, thus abstractly treating price formation as a "mathematical operation" removed from the "real conditions" of empirical complexity, which added non-calculable factors to the capitalist's decision to sell his commodity at a certain price.²³

Along the same line of argument, Bernstein charged that Marx's theory of value – relying on productive labor in determining a commodity's value – also involved itself in a number of misleading abstractions and reductions. For one, Marx incorrectly abstracted from use value, which led to the identification of exchange value with "abstract human labor," and ultimately reduced various concrete forms of labor to a "metaphysical concept" which failed to take into consideration more tangible factors like productivity, diligence, and skill.²⁴ This is not to say that Bernstein did not acknowledge that any scientific analysis of complex social phenomena required a certain degree of abstraction which was an unavoidable operation for the specific purposes of demonstration. Echoing Sombart's and Böhm-Bawerk's arguments, however, Bernstein claimed that Marx had gone too far, reducing value to a "purely abstract entity" devoid of "scientific validity."²⁵ Though Marx had masterfully employed these "mental constructions" for the purpose of exposing the workings of the capitalist economy, he had ultimately failed to develop a truly scientific theory.²⁶

The implications of Bernstein's empiricist judgment were obvious: if Marx's value theory lacked proper scientific grounding, then his crucial understanding of "surplus value" was flawed as well. For Bernstein, "surplus value" amounted to a "metaphysical image of which we have no example in reality," for exploitation could not be calculated in a "purely economic fashion."²⁷ Standing with one foot on subjectivist grounds,

²² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²³ Bernstein, "Allerhand Werttheoretisches," p. 371.

²⁴ See Gerhard Himmelfmann, "Die Rolle der Werttheorie in Bernsteins Konzept der politischen Ökonomie des Sozialismus," in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, p. 313.

²⁵ *PS*, p. 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁷ Bernstein, "Allerhand Werttheoretisches," p. 558.

Bernstein was bound to question the alleged objectivism of Marx’s theory of surplus value, with its core claim to provide an exact standard for the actual degree of exploitation in concrete cases. Having thus robbed Marx’s theory of its scientific status, Bernstein emphasized the *political* function of the notion of exploitation: it contributed to social democracy’s educational task of showing the proletariat the *social injustice* connected with the generation of profit. However, Bernstein’s interpretation deprived Marx’s theory of its central claim, because early socialist theorists like Proudhon had already provided the working class with ethical ammunition against capitalist exploitation. Consistent with his epistemological arguments against “scientific socialism,” Bernstein disavowed Engels’ claim that Marx’s economic theory represented a major “scientific” achievement.

Once again, Bernstein’s empiricist skepticism had triumphed over the need for dogmatic security. Considering exploitation an empirical condition manifested in the worker’s low living standard, capitalist injustice was “demonstrable from experience” and required “no deductive proof.” Hence, he denied that the case for a “scientific socialism” could be made “just on the fact that the wage laborer does not receive the full value of the product of his labor.”²⁸ According to Bernstein, workers had always been aware of the conditions of inequality underlying the economic and political subjugation which forced them to produce more than they received in wages. But as far as the concrete political practice of the labor movement was concerned, it was “unimportant whether or not one accepts the development of the theory of surplus value according to Marx.”²⁹ The point was to educate workers to see that their wages did not reflect the full value of their labor, thus appealing to their sense of *justice* and strengthening their will to organize effective forms of political and social resistance.

Bernstein did not see as the true test of “socialist” economic theories whether they “correctly” interpreted the myriad aspects of value formation, but how they helped to advance perennial union demands for a closer correspondence between wages and performance and price formation according to rational principles of cost coverage. In this regard, Bernstein revealed his sympathies for the pragmatic discourse of labor unionists and SPD *Praktiker*. What made him different, however, was his unwillingness to compromise on the core ethical principles of socialism. In other words, applied to the real conditions of advanced capitalism, any theory of surplus value was politically translatable only as an ethically motivated

²⁸ *PS*, p. 52, 56.

²⁹ Bernstein, “Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?,” p. 60.

theory of workers' emancipation, designed to strengthen the proletariat's resolve to fight "not against the fact of surplus labor but the extent of it."³⁰ Bernstein therefore insisted that any theory of value ought to emphasize its moral components – transcendental principles of equality and justice, which Marx and Engels had woefully neglected in favor of their historicism. Though Marxist economic theory illustrated the structural linkages between production and exploitation, the latter was not simply an objective relationship between economic variables, but, most importantly, expressed a violation of moral standards based on "eternal" liberal principles of justice.³¹

The role of the state

In line with his idealist revision of historical materialism, Bernstein strove to provide a critique of capitalist economy that relied on a more balanced explanation of the relationship between "objective" forces at the economic base and its corresponding forms in the "superstructure" – the state, law, and morality. Seeking to justify his position on the basis of his selective reading of Engels' late writings, Bernstein's theoretical move was nonetheless fundamentally "un-Marxist" in its reduction of social inequality to a question of wages. In other words, it turned exploitation into a sociopolitical problem based on the *unjust distribution* of social wealth which could never be solved through economics alone.³²

Bernstein therefore declined to fight the "utopian" battle against the very existence of both the wage system and the money form.³³ Rather, he anchored his socialist strategy in those practical concerns that seemed to correspond more closely to the working class' pressing political demands for a more equitable redistribution of the social product:

Today, the struggle of the working class is not directed against the wage form itself, but against the economic dependency relations which depress wages and prevent their rise according to the general increase of social wealth. The wage form is simply one part of an economic system that must be changed through the creation of a democratic-cooperative collectivism. It is only for symbolic reasons that we refer to this desired change of the wage system as a "struggle against wage labor." In reality, it is a struggle against the system of *wage determination*.³⁴

³⁰ Bernstein, "The Realistic and Ideological Moments in Socialism," in *MS*, pp. 239–240.

³¹ Bernstein, "Tugan Baranovsky als Sozialist," in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 28 (1909), pp. 789–790.

³² Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 71.

³³ Bernstein, "Vorfragen einer Sozialistischen Theorie der Gewerkschaftsbewegung," pp. 844–845.

³⁴ Bernstein, "Zur Frage des ehernen Lohngesetzes: Nachwort," in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, pp. 77–78.

Marx, of course, had insisted that the *social inequality* between capital and labor reflected in the class character of capitalist society would always reassert itself as long as the economic base of society remained unaltered.³⁵ This meant that the reproduction of both exploitation and repressive class relations occurred on the level of *economic production*. Reformist-redistributive policies implemented by a democratically elected socialist government operating within the old economic framework would never escape the biased logic of capitalist accumulation. Political measures aimed at eliminating social inequality would prove themselves incapable of moving capitalist society even an inch closer to its socialist *telos*. After all, the proper functioning of capitalism – the production and distribution of commodities – depended on the existence of a liberal political system that guaranteed the survival of the free-market system. The “bourgeois-liberal state” could therefore hardly be more than a “committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,” whose external form and mechanisms of repression would only disappear as the era of commodity-producing societies came to an end in a genuine socialist revolution.

Diverging from Marx, Bernstein returned at least partially to the subjectivism of the marginalists, thereby supporting the general liberal view of society as composed of equal and independent individual proprietors – categories of “bourgeois ideology” which Marx had criticized in both *The Jewish Question* and *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and which he further ridiculed in his famous allusion to bourgeois “Robinson Crusoe economists.”³⁶ Shattering Marx’s economic interpretation of social totality, Bernstein considered the state as no longer a secondary structure dependent on more primary class relations on the level of production, but as a semi-independent sphere capable of aggressive intervention, and thus critical for evolutionary socialism understood as ethical reformism.³⁷

Consequently, he put his faith in the ability of liberal-democratic institutions to accommodate the interests of the working class. In this context, we must remember that Marxist theorists writing at the turn of the century still had not offered a comprehensive formal treatise on the state. Marx’s own discussion consisted of a number of scattered and inconsistent general observations on the role and the character of the “bourgeois state,” usually couched in terms of his analysis of particular historical situations like the 1848 revolutions and the 1871

³⁵ *C I*, pp. 617–621.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–83.

³⁷ Eduard Bernstein, “Die Staatstheorien und der Sozialismus,” in *Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, pp. 75–90.

Paris Commune.³⁸ Criticizing Engels' anti-statist "utopianism" culminating in his famous notion of the "withering away of the state," Bernstein emphasized instead the state's flexible character and predicted its transformative potential from an arbitrary "power above the nation," into a "legal body of democratic self-administration."³⁹ Though he agreed with Marx on the coercive nature of the *nineteenth-century state*, particularly the German state, Bernstein considered instrumentalist interpretations of the state exclusively as an "organ of bourgeois oppression" as "too narrow."⁴⁰

If Marx de-emphasized the value of the state in bringing about lasting social reforms, then Ferdinand Lassalle's exaggeration of the state's role in facilitating a socialist transformation of society represented the other extreme. Though Bernstein shared Lassalle's emphasis on universal suffrage as the crucial precondition for social democracy, he nonetheless rejected the latter's Hegelian idealized collectivism, which, in the name of a proletarianized "general will," demanded the transformation of the liberal "night watchman state" into the prime instrument of working-class rule. Maintaining his long-standing suspicion of Lassallean state socialism and its "foggy notion of an all-encompassing nationalization of production,"⁴¹ Bernstein rejected the notion of a patronizing state indiscriminately dispensing social benefits to its citizens. He stressed the individual's responsibility for his or her own economic welfare, adding that there was no prospect for it to be "abolished" in any future socialist order:

Socialism can only *facilitate the discharge of this duty*. Anything more than that would be undesirable. We all know that the responsibility for oneself is only one side of a social principle, the obverse of which is personal freedom. The one is inconceivable without the other. However contradictory it may sound, the notion of abolishing the individual's responsibility for his own economic welfare is thoroughly anti-socialist.⁴²

Hence, the state's power in the economic realm needed to be limited, for self-directed economic initiative in certain areas remained an important element guaranteeing individual freedom.⁴³

³⁸ For a discussion of Marxist state theory, see, for example, Graeme Duncan, "The Marxist Theory of the State," in G. H. R. Parkinson, ed. *Marx and Marxisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), pp. 129–144; Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1980); Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Claus Offe, "Thesis on the Theory of State," in *New German Critique* 6 (Fall, 1975), pp. 137–147; and Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, vol. I. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

³⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance of Space and Number," in *MS*, p. 97. ⁴⁰ Bernstein, *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 88.

⁴¹ Bernstein, "Zum Thema Sozialliberalismus und Collectivismus," p. 181.

⁴² Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance of Space and Number," in *MS*, p. 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

Bernstein looked upon the state in the more balanced manner of L. T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson, and other British “New Liberals.” Emerging on the political scene in full force in the first decade of the new century, the New Liberals linked demands for greater economic equality with their traditional support for individual freedom by positing an activist, but *democratic* state as the possible site of a more harmonious association of citizens collectively and consciously regulating the terms of their mutual interactions.⁴⁴ This new liberal vision saw capitalism harboring at its core structural-political and economic inequalities which could be reduced with the help of an interventionist state apparatus anchored in concrete social institutions that guaranteed political equality, universal suffrage, and a democratic representation of societal interests.⁴⁵

However, this did not mean that Bernstein assumed the complete eradication of diverging social interests. By arguing that modernity had put an end to earlier forms of homogeneous social action based on strong solidaristic bonds among members of small communities – including idealized ethical relationships of harmony, like ancient forms of “direct democracy” – he was able to make an even stronger case for the survival of centralized administrative structures. The fact that modern states were characterized by extensive territories and a large citizenry fostered the emergence of ever more complex and differentiated group interests, thus increasing the need for a “coordinated regulation of social and economic matters.”⁴⁶ That is, the persistence of conflicting interests in modernity corresponded to the emergence of a pluralist society, making it both impossible and undesirable to “simply leave the state behind.”⁴⁷

The complexity of modern society increased the pressure on the state to produce legislation reflecting the “common good” as the outcome of rational and democratic negotiations across class lines. Though Bernstein conceded that overlapping class interests rarely went beyond general policies like education, health care, and national defense, he nonetheless saw in the liberal-functionalist ideal of the “common good” the ideological expression of persisting forms of social cohesion, which could serve as a powerful regulative idea and common normative matrix connecting *all* social classes. According to Bernstein, the true function of the state as the

⁴⁴ See, for example, L. T. Hobhouse, “Liberalism,” in James Meadowcroft, ed. *Liberalism and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 1–120.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the “New Liberals,” see Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*; Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Modern Society* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1992); M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978); and S. Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979).

⁴⁶ Bernstein, *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

“appointed guardian of the common good,” was its representation of society as a whole.⁴⁸ Therefore, a “liberal” socialism ought to acknowledge both existing forms of class conflict and class consensus expressed as communal interests (political cooperation) and special interests (competition).

Underlying this vision was Bernstein’s sanguine assessment of the sustainability of a “democratic evolution” even in the Wilhelmine Empire, which, he thought, would eventually culminate in a state reflecting the political will of *all* its citizens. Once in the hands of liberal socialists, such representative democracies could gradually abolish both political privileges and the “strong tendency of the dominant classes to burden other classes with the costs of public welfare.”⁴⁹ Kautsky and his orthodox comrades begged to differ with Bernstein’s “evolutionism;” not so much on the desirability or even the possibility of reform and gradualism in general, but about the prospects for a peaceful democratization and for socialist cooperation with a liberal bourgeoisie specifically in the German Empire.

Overall, then, Bernstein perceived the state in pluralist terms as a potentially “autonomous” arena which regulated the “common affairs” of individuals. With unshakable optimism, he emphasized the gradual realization of the “contractarian idea” as the ontological underpinnings of his progressive belief in the “organic evolution” of solidarity and socialism.⁵⁰ Sharing the utilitarian creed which saw society develop unilinearly from inscribed forms of social status to the rule of voluntary contracts fostering the expansion of equality, reciprocity, and legality, Bernstein underscored the significance of “advancing legal concepts and institutions which facilitate the mediation of class conflicts without resorting to force.”⁵¹ Hence, he reiterated the importance of the political sphere for both easing the external relationship among different states, and “institutionalizing” – and thus harnessing – domestic class conflict.⁵²

Viewing the modern state as an increasingly autonomous site also allowed him to define class inequalities in terms of differences in income and privileges, rather than as systemic contradictions rooted in the process

⁴⁸ Bernstein, “Was ist Sozialismus?,” in Heimann, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 157.

⁴⁹ Bernstein, “Die Notwendigkeit in Natur und Geschichte,” in *Zur Theorie und Geschichte des Sozialismus*, p. 68.

⁵⁰ Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei*, pp. 44–45.

⁵¹ Bernstein, “Idee und Interesse in der Geschichte,” in *Bernstein A*, A53.

⁵² Bernstein’s call for mediating class conflicts found its full expression in neo-corporatist “social partnerships” between employers and labor in post-World War II European countries like Austria, Germany, and Sweden.

of production.⁵³ Bernstein therefore implicitly challenged the Marxist thesis of “irreconcilable class conflicts” emerging from the contradictions at the economic base. This meant contesting the Marxist dichotomy between liberalism and socialism: “The term ‘social-liberalism’ indicates in no way a fundamental opposition to ‘social democracy.’”⁵⁴

Once the Marxian connection between economic production and social structure was cut, Bernstein was in the position to restore politics, the state, and democratic theory to the center of socialist thought. It allowed the evolutionary project of socialist transformation to originate in a distinct “political” realm where the general will of citizens was represented in a democratically accountable parliament. Further strategic ramifications of Bernstein’s theory of state were obvious: liberal democracy was flexible enough to permit genuine political participation as well as significant social control of economic institutions.

However, without the concurrent expansion of labor unions and economic cooperatives, a socialist control of the state apparatus alone would not be enough to bring about a perfectly egalitarian society. Still, the democratic legitimacy emanating from fair, comprehensive elections would give the state a major role in mediating class conflict and regulating disruptive forms of free-market competition. Revolution was not “inevitable” because class conflicts were not irreconcilable. Social democracy, understood as a “people’s party,” adhering to democratic reformism and willing to entertain alliances with other liberal-democratic parties, could spearhead the creation of a “socialist republic.” The political institutions of such a state would implement legally binding rules for a more just distribution of the social product and the gradual elimination of surviving political and economic privileges of the bourgeoisie.⁵⁵ Thus, without the pernicious social dislocations brought about by revolutionary upheavals, modern, complex societies – including the German authoritarian-capitalist system – could slowly grow into a democratic socialism. This “evolutionary vision,” in a nutshell, constituted the core of Bernstein’s liberal socialism.

In summary, then, we can say that Bernstein’s return to Lange’s epistemology led to his idealist reinterpretation of historical materialism and his critique of Marx’s labor theory of value, which, in turn, formed the theoretical foundation for his pluralist theory of state. The latter allowed him to not only contest Marx’s dichotomy between liberalism and

⁵³ See Freudenthal, “Otto Neurath: From Authoritarian Liberalism to Empiricism,” in Dascal and Grüngard, *Knowledge and Politics*, pp. 218–219. My discussion in this chapter owes much to the excellent contributions of Freudenthal, Himmelmann, and Coletti.

⁵⁴ Bernstein, “Zum Thema Sozialliberalismus und Collectivismus,” p. 183.

⁵⁵ PS, pp. 143–144; *Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, pp. 59–90.

socialism but arrive at a “constructive” theoretical alternative – evolutionary socialism. Hence, before turning to a more detailed discussion of Bernstein’s theory of socialist transformation, we must closely examine the theoretical link between Bernstein’s liberal political framework and his understanding of socialism.

Socialism and liberalism

If, as pointed out in Engels’ influential 1884 study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the capitalist state was merely an epiphenomenal response to the necessity of containing class conflicts and maintaining the repressive order of the ruling bourgeoisie, orthodox Marxists were indeed right in their assessment that liberalism and socialism were inherently antagonistic.⁵⁶ To be fair, however, we must note that both Marx and Engels wholeheartedly supported liberal political movements for representative and responsible government in so far as they opposed established monarchical systems or the remains of a feudal social order. There is no reason to think that the array of democratic rights they endorsed in 1848 was merely tactical. But the political forms of representative democracy could only be supported as transitional goals on the way to socialism and could not be constitutive of “socialist democracy” itself. Liberals were simply incapable of living up to the radical “democratic rights” they espoused because their political institutions were based upon the preservation of private property and capitalism. Hence, Marx and Engels regarded liberal democracy as a whole as insufficient to remedy the economic causes of the “social question.”⁵⁷ Governments would always turn repressive in order to protect large-scale property and the inequality that the economic system necessarily generated. Indeed, Marx and Engels could point to a number of historical examples that validated their analysis: French “liberals” who didn’t act to defend popular suffrage and democratic practice in parliament against Louis Bonaparte, and German “liberals” who voted with Conservatives in favor of the anti-socialist laws.

Luxemburg expressed these sentiments when she argued that Bernstein’s rejection of Marx’s labor theory of value, combined with his bourgeois views on the nature of society, had transformed socialism into a “variety of liberalism,” thereby depriving the “socialist movement (generally) of its class character, and consequently of its historic content.”⁵⁸ Subsequent generations of Marxist thinkers followed in her footsteps by

⁵⁶ Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm*, p. 173.

⁵⁷ See Carver, *Friedrich Engels*, p. 173.

⁵⁸ Luxemburg, *Reform and Revolution?*, p. 57.

interpreting Bernstein's obvious liberal inclinations as exerting a "pernicious influence" on the labor movement as a whole.⁵⁹

But "socialist democracy," in a Marxist sense, only conflicts with "liberalism" if one accepts Kautsky's and Luxemburg's inveterate identification of "true socialism" with "Marxism." This study, however, suggests that Bernstein's crucial contribution to socialist theory lies in his intellectual quest for the ideological foundation of a liberal, or evolutionary, socialism that deviates from Marxist doctrine in fundamental ways. Bernstein consciously evolved liberalism (with its crucial concepts of popular sovereignty, the rule of law, religious tolerance, rational redress of grievances, and the primacy of the individual), and socialism (understood as the democratic accountability of political and economic institutions/representatives and distributive justice), into a new synthesis: the prototype of a "modern" understanding of social democracy.⁶⁰ Seeking to find common ground in both traditions, Bernstein abandoned Marx's economically based critique of bourgeois political and judicial institutions as systematically and exclusively serving ruling-class interests:

As an expression of social relations, the political program of *The Communist Manifesto* is that of a conquerer who wants to incorporate the province, torn away from the enemy, as fast as possible. There are no common interests, no obligations between victor and vanquished; there are two absolute, separated camps and between its members there are no common threads whatsoever.⁶¹

Indeed, Bernstein did not share Marx's scorn for bourgeois "civil society" and its egoistic, "so-called rights of man," which reflected the fundamental capitalist disjuncture between the alienated individual and

⁵⁹ Luxemburg, in *ibid.*, called Bernstein a "simpleton" with a "poor understanding of Marxian economics;" a man whose theory amounted to a "passive betrayal" of the working class (pp. 39, 53). See also Alex Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), pp. 65–66.

⁶⁰ This understanding is most clearly revealed in the SPD's 1959 Godesberg Program: "Socialism is a continuous task – to fight for freedom and justice, to keep those values, and to persevere with them . . . Socialism is realized only through democracy, democracy is fulfilled through socialism." Cited in Wolfgang Abendroth, *Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* (Frankfurt: Stimme Verlag, 1964), pp. 129–130. Although Kolakowski (1978), noticing this synthesis, calls Bernstein's revisionism a "socialist variant of liberalism" (p. 114), nobody has properly articulated the theoretical and political components of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism. See, for example, Meyer, *Bernstein's konstruktiver Sozialismus*; Heimann, *Texte zum Revisionismus*; Lehnert, *Reform und Revolution in den Strategiediskussionen der klassischen Sozialdemokratie*; Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*; Grebing, *Der Revisionismus: Von Bernstein bis zum "Prager Frühling"*; Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854–1938*; and Pachter, "The Ambiguous Legacy of Eduard Bernstein," in Bronner, *Socialism in History: The Political Essays of Henry Pachter*, pp. 256–283.

⁶¹ Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei*, p. 9.

the community.⁶² Instead, “evolutionary socialism” was rooted in its departure from the sphere of production and the corresponding Marxist reduction of man to a *homo faber*, whose “human nature” was determined by his particular mode of productive activity.⁶³ As pointed out in the previous chapter, Bernstein’s empiricist analysis of society tended to treat socioeconomic entities as though they were indisputable entities, the “givens” of objective reality. As a result, he viewed personal rights as moral entitlements based on abstractly defined human qualities and capacities. This meant, to put it in less favorable Marxist terms, to confuse “bourgeois man” with “man-in-general.”

While he acknowledged the importance of Marx’s famous “Sixth Thesis” on Feuerbach, which characterized humans as a fluid “ensemble of social relationships,” Bernstein nonetheless insisted that the social environment did not fully determine “human nature.”⁶⁴ Obviously, he was referring to transhistorical moral standards inherent in “reason” itself – a rational morality of *Recht* traditionally expressed in the natural law concepts of liberal thinkers from Locke to Kant and Mill. In fact, Bernstein did not hesitate to praise the historically progressive role of natural law precepts as providing a rational check on limited positive law, thus inspiring generations of “radical spirits to protest against the domination of tradition with its antiquated social institutions, political conditions, and ideology.”⁶⁵ This moral foundation in *Recht* provided him with a conceptual framework to encourage his fellow socialists to drop their dogmatic Marxist slogans denouncing appeals to human rights as signs of “false consciousness” and defeatism, and to frame their political demands within a rights-centered discourse of liberal democracy instead.⁶⁶ Successfully appropriating the liberal language of the radical *citoyen* of the French Revolution for social democracy, Bernstein clearly subscribed to a non-Marxist conception of “civil society,” which, for him, meant less an alienated sphere of self-centered individuals than a voluntary association of individuals according to the ethos of the Enlightenment.

Regretting that the German word “*bürgerlich*” did not allow for the crucial distinction between the progressive “*citoyen*” and the conservative

⁶² Marx’s seminal texts in this regard are: *On the Jewish Question*, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, *The German Ideology*, and *Critique of the Gotha Program*, all in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

⁶³ See also Freudenthal, “Otto Neurath: From Authoritarian Liberalism to Empiricism,” in Dascal and Grüngard, *Knowledge and Politics*, pp. 219–221.

⁶⁴ PS, p. 17.

⁶⁵ Bernstein, “Die naturrechtliche Begründung des Sozialismus,” in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Eduard Bernstein, *Parlamentarismus und Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Pan, 1906), p. 13; and PS, pp. 149, 160.

"*bourgeois*," Bernstein insisted that it was only the property owners' claim for special privileges *vis-à-vis* the state that made them "bourgeois" in their ideological outlook.⁶⁷ Consequently, he showed great sympathy for Friedrich Schiller's optimism regarding the possible transformation of Germany's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* into a vibrant public sphere, whose paramount task it was to restore an ethical society which would protect the moral and economic autonomy of individuals from the atomizing and dehumanizing tendencies of *bourgeois capitalism*.⁶⁸ However, this did not mean that Bernstein failed to recognize the bourgeoisie's ideological and social hold on civil society. Still, the permeation of modern society by bourgeois culture only highlighted the critical role of civil society in the political project of social democracy, which aimed at imbuing political associations with democratic principles and, ultimately, at transforming public institutions. Bernstein felt that the working class should utilize the critical potential of civil society by claiming the "public sphere" as a forum for the open exchange of emancipatory ideas amongst equal citizens.

As the first prominent spokesman of modern social democracy, Bernstein reversed Marx's romantic holism, which looked down upon civil society as the French Revolution's short-lived experiment in political emancipation. For Bernstein, civil society could not be reduced to selfish, independent individuals, released from their communal obligations and left to their egotistical wishes and desires:

No one thinks of destroying civil society as a community ordered in a civilized way. Quite to the contrary, Social Democracy does not want to break up civil society and make all its members proletarians together; rather, it ceaselessly labors to raise the worker from the social position of a proletarian to that of a citizen and thus make citizenship universal. It does not want to replace civil society with a proletarian society but a capitalist order of society with a socialist one.⁶⁹

Bernstein's notion of creating an equal partnership of all *citoyens* in a commonwealth within a *socialist* (i.e., redistributive) framework required him to lower the standards of Marx's totalistic demands for "human emancipation" and a rational control of production. Settling for the more modest role of mediator between differing systems of thought, and remaining loyal to the liberal enterprise of "political emancipation," Bernstein's evolutionary socialism approached the humanist vision of Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Schiller, who argued that the existence of civil society and abstract human rights protected individual

⁶⁷ Eduard Bernstein, "Randbemerkungen," in *SM* 13 (1909), p. 883; and *PS*, p. 146.

⁶⁸ Friedrich von Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke: Säkular Ausgabe*, vol. V (Berlin: Cotta, 1904), p. 593. For a discussion on Schiller and modernity, see Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 59–65.

⁶⁹ *PS*, p. 146.

liberty institutionalized as the liberal distinction between private and public. Most of all, Bernstein's approach liberated the political subject from the smothering objectivity of Marx's historicism, thus encouraging individual responsibility and permanent self-criticism as the springs for a socialist action understood as the never-ending, "constructive" task of transforming political and socioeconomic structures within the framework of liberal democracy.⁷⁰

Like the British "New Liberals," Bernstein understood individual liberty not "in the metaphysical sense dreamed of by the anarchists – that is, free from all duties toward the community – but free from any economic compulsion in [one's] actions and choice of vocation."⁷¹ Defining freedom as the "highest possible degree of individual self-determination," he supported legal equality and equality of opportunity as the organizing principles for the social implementation of liberty. At the same time, however, he firmly rejected "communist" demands for absolute equality as "abstract" and even dangerous: "Even if we cherish equality as our social principle, we cannot posit it as the ethical goal of human development, for it represents a desired social objective only when applied to certain cases. Or, to put it differently: equality is a sporadic human ideal; freedom, however, is an eternal one."⁷²

Applied to the concrete politics of the labor movement, Bernstein's primacy of liberty translated as an ethical appeal to workers' solidarity. The extension of their civil rights and political and economic forms of self-determination were only possible through the institutionalization of effective workers' organizations.

For Social Democracy, the defense of civil liberty has always taken precedence over the fulfillment of any economic postulate. The aim of all socialist measures, even of those that outwardly appear to be coercive measures, is the development and protection of the free personality. A closer examination of such measures always shows that the coercion in question will *increase* the sum total of liberty in society, and will give *more* freedom over a *more extended* area than it takes away. For instance, the legally enforced maximum working day is actually a delimitation of minimum freedom, a prohibition against selling your freedom for longer than a certain number of hours daily, and as such it stands, in principle, on the same ground as the prohibition, accepted by all liberals, against selling oneself permanently into personal servitude.⁷³

It is hardly surprising that Bernstein ultimately acknowledged socialism as

⁷⁰ Thomas Meyer (1977) refers to Bernstein's reformist strategy as a "constructive socialism" aiming to reformulate socialist theory under modern conditions of highly complex social structures (p. 386).

⁷¹ PS, p. 150.

⁷² Eduard Bernstein, *Die Arbeiterbewegung* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Löning, 1910), p. 135.

⁷³ PS, pp. 147–148.

the "legitimate heir" to a liberalism defined not in terms of the incomplete agenda of existing German liberal parties, but as an historical movement fighting in the name of the universalist principles of the French Revolution, aiming to liberate the *citoyen* from his dependency on the church, the repressive state, and the capitalist economy.⁷⁴ Bernstein discerned even in the flawed "bourgeois" version of liberalism an "evolutionary principle" that was noticeably absent in feudalism: a universalist logic and a libertarian discourse that provided the basis for the inclusionary demands of marginalized social groups.⁷⁵ If the rising bourgeoisie, reflected in a vitalized public sphere with its ability to generate critical debate and popular activity, was able to contest authoritarianism, then the succeeding progressive social movements led by social democracy could use the same liberal logic to further extend representative democracy as well as civil and economic rights.

Nearly everywhere it took force to destroy feudalism with its rigid corporate institutions. The liberal institutions of modern society differ from these precisely in being flexible and capable of change and development. They do not need to be destroyed; they only need to be further developed. For that we require organization and energetic action, but not necessarily a revolutionary dictatorship.⁷⁶

Yet, this benign vision did not forestall Bernstein's strong disapproval of classical liberals who sought to limit citizenship to members of the first three estates. Referring to them as "destroyers of solidarity and community," he attacked their "phoney universalism" as nothing more than an illiberal defense of existing political privilege and economic inequality.⁷⁷ In order to evolve according to its own core principles, traditional liberal theory had to be "modernized," that is, complemented with the principles of solidarity and distributive justice, which, under mature capitalism, found its most powerful objective expression in the demands of working class.⁷⁸ Organized around the ideals of cooperation, liberty, and distributive justice, the labor movement was therefore the logical successor of classical liberalism.⁷⁹

Derived from the Latin word *socius* (equal associate), "socialism" meant for Bernstein "organized liberalism."⁸⁰ Socialism "evolved" from liberalism in accordance with the principle of cooperation, offering its "equally associated" members the same *right* in participating in socially

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Bernstein to Bebel (October 20, 1898) in *MS*, p. 326; and *PS*, p. 150.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁷⁷ Bernstein, "Hat der Liberalismus eine Zukunft in Deutschland?", *Bernstein A*, E112; and *PS*, p. 148.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Bernstein, *Wesen und Aussichten des bürgerlichen Radikalismus*, pp. 42–45.

⁸⁰ *PS*, p. 150.

consequential decision-making processes.⁸¹ This definition contains the essence of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism understood as a worker-led movement pervaded by humanitarian ethics, objectivity and scientific openness, and reliance on principles of legality which defended individual liberty against oppressive social conditions and institutions.⁸² Far from needing to be destroyed, liberal democracy actually represented the indispensable foundation of the socialist political project towards extending political and economic democracy: "[I]n the last instance, for me, socialism means democracy, self-administration."⁸³

The core of the socialist project: extending political and economic democracy

Opting for a reformist gradualism as the appropriate strategy for modern social democracy, Bernstein suggested that socialism should not be understood as a theoretically rigid scheme attached to the utopian vision of a total transformation of bourgeois society: "Our politics must be geared toward achieving political rights through the consequent and systematic application of social democratic reform policies."⁸⁴ He considered large-scale revolutions no longer an option in highly complex European societies. The modern state could not, as Lenin would later insist, simply be "smashed" without hampering the healthy development of all classes, and especially that of the working class.⁸⁵ As the guiding political maxim of social democracy, Bernstein suggested the "implementation of the most thorough reforms possible under given circumstances."⁸⁶

The evolutionary process of political and social emancipation had to go hand in hand with a "specific degree of social development in economic, political, and other cultural regards, and, consequently, with the specific needs and possibilities of the working class."⁸⁷ For Bernstein, the development of social democracy itself reflected the gradual political

⁸¹ Bernstein, "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 65.

⁸² Eduard Bernstein, *Parlamentarismus und Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Pan, 1906), p. 13.

⁸³ Bernstein to Kautsky (February 20, 1898), *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, DV432; and *PS*, p. 155.

⁸⁴ Eduard Bernstein, "Zum Reformismus," in *SM* 12 (1908), p. 1,404.

⁸⁵ However, he explicitly referred to the people's "right to revolution" in order to bring about political democracy (*PS*, p. 186). This was the reason why, in the 1905 mass-strike debate, Bernstein sided with the radical left wing of the party, endorsing "illegal means" like the mass strike as an appropriate tool to foster political democracy. See chapter 7 for the discussion of the mass strike.

⁸⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "Grundlinien des sozialdemokratischen Reformismus," in *SM* 12 (1908), p. 1,517.

⁸⁷ Bernstein, "Noch etwas zu Endziel und Bewegung," p. 504.

learning experience of the proletariat, maturing in its ongoing struggle for greater political freedom and economic self-determination.⁸⁸ While the political privileges of the Junkers and the bourgeoisie needed to be abolished as soon as possible, Bernstein insisted that the working class had to utilize its own electoral potential to determine the pace and extent of the realization of socialist principles.⁸⁹ The Marxist notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was anathema for Bernstein, for it completely disregarded the growing social complexity of modern society, which limited socialist strategy to the gradual and constructive replacement of parts of the capitalist system with democratic structures corresponding to the socialist principle of cooperation.⁹⁰

But how did Bernstein respond to the charge that his evolutionary socialism represented just another “utopian” scheme? Firstly, he argued that the socioeconomic privileges of the ruling classes no longer determined the decision-making processes of the modern state to the extent they did only a few decades before. Secondly, he maintained that genuine democratic reforms were already successfully advanced in a “legal” manner by the three main branches of the labor movement: its nationally and locally elected representatives, labor unions, and its cooperative associations. No doubt, Bernstein was extremely interested in complementing his democratic theory with concrete political proposals. Evolutionary socialism translated politically into the continuous creation of legal frameworks with democratic legitimacy, the partial social regulation of production in the form of economic plans, and the maximization of production and general welfare through an extensive network of public administration and voluntary associations.⁹¹

Thirdly, Bernstein argued that the old antagonistic tactics of simply using the Reichstag for public expression of protest had long passed. Bernstein felt that a more positive attitude toward parliamentarianism was indeed warranted by the actual political situation in Germany.⁹² Though he was keenly aware of his country’s political backwardness, he nonetheless rejected the orthodox Marxist notion that the “evolutionary road” in Germany was permanently blocked or bound to hit a systemic barrier. After all, a modest case could be made that the democratic demands of the SPD and the trade unions were *increasing* the pressure on the government to permit the transformation of the Reichstag “from the propertied upper

⁸⁸ Bernstein, “Vom deutschen Arbeiter einst und jetzt,” pp. 175–184.

⁸⁹ Bernstein, *Wie eine Revolution zugrunde ging*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Bernstein, “Zum Reformismus,” p. 1,405.

⁹¹ Bernstein, “Was ist Sozialismus?,” in Heimann, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 163.

⁹² Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei*, p. 16; and Bernstein, *Parlamentarismus und Sozialdemokratie*, p. 41.

class organ of domination to the authorized representative of the nation's productive masses – from an exclusivist discussion club to working body.”⁹³ It was less clear, however, whether such pressure necessarily translated into democratic change.

The weakness in Bernstein's unilinear model of an “evolutionary logic toward democracy” inherent in liberalism was its failure to grasp that reformist gradualism and revolution did not always exclude each other, but, as in the case of the 1918–19 German Revolution, sometimes even complemented each other. Granted, Bernstein conceded that parliaments were neither “perfect institutions” nor “the sole determining element toward greater democratization,” but he still placed too much trust in the weak Wilhelmine parliamentary system as *the* crucial political and educational tool for the working class.⁹⁴

Deeply influenced by the history of British parliamentarianism, Bernstein regarded the German parliament as constituting an important political laboratory for the SPD in finding common ground with left-liberal and centrist parties which also had a “strong interest” in the struggle against the rule of “plutocratic feudalism.”⁹⁵ While occurring in England with certain regularity, such progressive alliances almost never materialized in Wilhelmine Germany.⁹⁶ As the following chapters will show, Bernstein became painfully aware of the fact that it was not only the nationalist-conservative attitude of the German liberal parties that made such large-scale coalitions impossible, but also his own party's rigid pursuit of an oppositional “politics of splendid isolation.” While international workers' congresses in Paris and Amsterdam rejected alliances between socialist and bourgeois parties *in principle*, Bernstein kept warning his party that, once it had made a binding decision in favor of democratic participation, it ought to follow parliamentary rules with their logic of political bargaining and compromise:

Despite the existence of vehement political struggles and sharp economic divisions between political parties, it would be a mistake to rigidly separate parties or classes by “Chinese Walls.” The rapid changes in contemporary society clearly discourage the use of such rigid dichotomies. In reality, we can observe a constant decline of the old, and the rise of new groups within classes, as well as changes in the relationship of parties to each other.⁹⁷

Drawing on the past historical experience of the German labor move-

⁹³ Bernstein, “Zur Frage des neuen Parteiprogramms der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands,” in *Das Program der Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1920), p. 30.

⁹⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Vom Wert des Parlamentarismus,” in *SM* 8 (1904), p. 427.

⁹⁵ Bernstein, *Parliamentarismus und Sozialdemokratie*, p. 53.

⁹⁶ For an excellent account of the failed attempt to create such a “grand bloc,” see Heckart, *From Basserman to Bebel*.

⁹⁷ Bernstein, “Randbemerkungen,” p. 884.

ment, Kautsky and Luxemburg were rightfully skeptical of the efficacy of a parliamentary road to a "socialist republic."⁹⁸ It took indeed a big leap of faith to warm up to Bernstein's optimistic conviction that the rudimentary liberal framework existing in the Empire was flexible enough to accommodate a democratic development without revolutionary violence. It was one thing to emphasize the commitment to parliamentary activity as the proper instrument to advance liberal reforms, but it was quite another to experience the powerlessness of the Reichstag on a daily basis. Undoubtedly, the issue of the political potential of a consequent reformism in Germany was one of the main themes separating Bernstein's vision of evolutionary socialism from orthodox Marxism.

There was agreement, however, that the most pressing demand of the working class was the achievement of political democracy, which Bernstein understood as the self-government of the people under the exclusion of particular group interests and other forms of class domination: "Democracy is both means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realized."⁹⁹ Rooted in the political morality of *Recht*, he insisted that democracy was "distinguished not by the absence of laws which limit individual rights, but by the abolition of all laws which limit the universal equality of rights, the equal right of all."¹⁰⁰ In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Bernstein's conception of democracy drew heavily from Kant's and Mill's models of representative democracy, rejecting the potentially illiberal blueprints of direct democracy emerging from Rousseau's political theory. Therefore, the principle of representation, rotation in power, the right of organized opposition, and the political protection of minorities assumed central significance in Bernstein's democratic theory.¹⁰¹

But the realization of political democracy in Germany presupposed the introduction of universal, equal suffrage in all parts of the country, as well as the accountability of national and local government to the electorate. Echoing Lassalle's warning that, without universal suffrage as its central goal, the labor movement would merely constitute a "philosophical school" or "religious sect," Bernstein argued that the reform of electoral laws would amount to the institutionalization of a "permanent democratic revolution," which, in the long run, was bound to end the social subjugation of the working class:

⁹⁸ Luxemburg correctly interpreted Engels's endorsement of parliamentarianism only as a temporary socialist strategy for a more timely revolution down the road.

⁹⁹ *PS*, pp. 142, 140; and "Wie ist wissenschaftlicher Sozialismus möglich?," p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ *PS*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁰¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Der sozialistische Begriff der Demokratie," in *Sozialdemokratische Völkerpolitik: Die Sozialdemokratie und die Frage Europa* (Leipzig: Verlag Naturwissenschaften, 1917), p. 15.

Wherever workers enjoy the full benefits of universal suffrage, they simultaneously achieve a more mature class consciousness, driving them to pressure the state for increases in spending in order to fulfill higher social and cultural expectations. Such workers strongly support demands to socialize monopolistic enterprises . . . The social impact of universal suffrage . . . has often been underestimated by prominent socialists.¹⁰²

In this passage, Bernstein seems to challenge Marx's early discreditation of universal suffrage as leading to a "misrepresentation of the people" – claims frequently repeated in the early "Eisenacher days" by Wilhelm Liebknecht. Having become rather adroit in using selected passages of Engels' later writings against "orthodox Marxism," Bernstein begged to differ: "One could imagine the old society peacefully growing into the new in those countries where a national assembly represents social power and is free to implement what it wants, in accordance with the majority of the people."¹⁰³

As a necessary means to accomplish such sweeping electoral reforms, Bernstein supported both extraparlimentary actions like the "defensive" mass strike for the achievement of political rights, and the expansion of workers' "industrial rights" led by the trade unions acting as "the indispensable organs of democracy."¹⁰⁴ Ignoring orthodox assertions that revisionist demands for a distinct "socialist theory of trade unions" ran contrary to a Marxist conception of a party-led socialist movement, he called upon left intellectuals to rethink the role and task of unionism under the conditions of advanced capitalism.¹⁰⁵

Clearly influenced by the strong union tradition in Britain, Bernstein accepted Sidney Webb's thesis that trade unions, by virtue of their sociopolitical position, were extremely well suited to lead the struggle for a more equitable distribution of profits in production, and thus help "erode the absolute power of capital and give the worker a direct influence in the management of industry."¹⁰⁶ Given his bleak assessments regarding the abolition of the wage system in the foreseeable future, Bernstein felt that the more realistic task of democratizing the wage-determination process offered labor unions a large and rewarding field for progressive political action.¹⁰⁷ In fact, he argued that the full achievement of a fair collective-bargaining process and genuine workers' co-determination – formulated

¹⁰² Bernstein, "Was ist Sozialismus?," p. 158; Eduard Bernstein, "Die neueste Prognose der sozialen Revolution," in *SM* 6 (1902), p. 598; and "Vom Parlament und vom Parlamentarismus," in *SM* 16 (1912), p. 656.

¹⁰³ Engels in *MEW* 22, p. 234.

¹⁰⁴ *PS*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁵ Bernstein, "Vorfragen einer Sozialistischen Theorie der Gewerkschaftsbewegung," pp. 839–846.

¹⁰⁶ *PS*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁷ Bernstein, "Grundlinien des sozialdemokratischen Reformismus," p. 1,516.

within the framework of fair labor laws – would come very close to the actual "democratization of all workshops and factories."¹⁰⁸

However, in pursuing these important objectives, the political and economic branches of the labor movement needed to iron out their strained relations based on ideological differences. Here Bernstein grasped the necessity for linking the parliamentary form of representation characteristic of modern liberal democracy with workplace-based forms of democracy organized at the point of production. Along those lines, he developed a comprehensive socialist theory of reform designed to facilitate a new, more effective working relationship between the party and the unions: "If we understand the term "parliamentarian" as a *method* instead of confining it to the activities of the legislature, then it also characterizes the union movement which strives for a parliamentarian, and not a revolutionary implementation of its tasks."¹⁰⁹

Though redistributive measures would translate into a higher living standard for working people, Bernstein advised the party to combine the struggle against the capitalists' pocketing of high profits in *production* with the battle against inordinate profits in *trade*. To encourage such efforts, Bernstein emerged as one of the most avid supporters of consumer cooperatives and regional and local organs of self-government.¹¹⁰ He viewed the role of economic interest groups among working people as a dramatic enhancement of the individual's effectiveness in pressuring the state for effective political participation and economic co-determination.

The large territories and vast populations of modern states make it increasingly difficult for the individual to get an overall idea of what a state administration might be expected to achieve . . . If the individual were to confront this vast community with no intermediary, merely as one unit among a million others, then democracy would be no more than an empty word. The most perfect electoral system, the most far-reaching application of the principle of direct legislation, would, of itself, make very little difference. The will of each individual would be neutralized by that of other individuals, and the real rulers would be the heads of the administration, of bureaucracy. Hence the importance of *intermediate institutions*.¹¹¹

Ultimately, Bernstein sought to find a workable balance between state centralism and political and economic decentralization. His guiding idea

¹⁰⁸ Bernstein, "Vorfragen einer Sozialistischen Theorie der Gewerkschaftsbewegung," p. 845; and Bernstein, "Die nächsten möglichen Verwirklichungen des Sozialismus," in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, pp. 126–144.

¹⁰⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "Das vergrabene Pfund und die Taktik der Sozialdemokratie," in *SM* 10 (1906), p. 294. See also "Vorfragen einer Sozialistischen Theorie der Gewerkschaftsbewegung," p. 841.

¹¹⁰ For a more detailed description of Bernstein's theory of economic cooperatives, see *PS*, pp. 110–136.

¹¹¹ Bernstein, "The Social and Political Significance of Space and Number," in *MS*, p. 95.

of "democratic socialization" was not tied to a complete take-over of the economy by the socialist state, but to the dispersion of power combined with "strong forms of public control, and a strong sense of shared responsibility."¹¹² He clearly foresaw the danger of creating a soviet-style state bureaucracy, for he emphasized that the "bureaucratization of industry" was "no guarantee for the development of productive forces."¹¹³ Therefore, he predicted a long-term co-existence of political democracy with a mixed economy:

It [socialism] would be completely mad to burden itself with additional tasks of so complex a nature as the setting up and controlling of comprehensive state production centers on a mass scale – quite apart from the fact that only certain specific branches of production can be run on a national basis . . . Competition would have to be reckoned with, at least in the transitional period.¹¹⁴

In the end, Bernstein reached a position that echoed many concerns raised in our contemporary debate on "economic democracy."¹¹⁵ Ironically, in the late 1920s these "Bernsteinian economics" resurfaced in the theories of the Weimar socialist Fritz Naphtali, who urged the expansion of state control over economic life through both anti-monopoly legislation and counter-cyclical credit and public investment policy.¹¹⁶ Bernstein's and Naphtali's blueprints for economic democracy were further developed during the 1970s as part of a large-scale "Bernstein Renaissance" in Germany spearheaded by the young faction of "Democratic Socialists" in the SPD.¹¹⁷

The theoretical foundation of these subsequent elaborations on "econ-

¹¹² Eduard Bernstein, *Die Sozialisierung der Betriebe* (Basel, 1919), p. 19.

¹¹³ Bernstein, *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 135.

¹¹⁴ Bernstein, "Critical Interlude," in *MS*, pp. 218–219.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); and Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*.

¹¹⁶ Fritz Naphtali, *Wirtschaftsdemokratie: Ihr Wesen, Weg, und Ziel* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1977).

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Peter Glotz, *Der Weg der Sozialdemokratie: Der historische Auftrag des Reformismus* (Vienna/Munich: Molden, 1975); David W. Morgan, "The Father of Revisionism Revisited: Eduard Bernstein," in *Journal of Modern History* 51 (September 1979), pp. 525–532; Robert S. Wistrich, "Back to Bernstein?," in *Encounter* 50.6 (1978), pp. 75–80; Lehnert, *Reform und Revolution in den Strategiediskussionen der klassischen Sozialdemokratie*; Grebing, *Der Revisionismus: Von Bernstein bis zum "Prager Frühling"*; Heimann, "Die Aktualität Eduard Bernsteins," in Bernstein, *Texte zum Revisionismus*; Sven Papcke, *Der Revisionismusstreit und die politische Theorie der Reform* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1979); C. Butterwegge, "Der Bernstein-Boom in der SPD. Grundlagen, Geschichte und Funktionen der gegenwärtigen Revisionismus-Renaissance," in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 5 (1978); and the editorial in *Der Spiegel* (October 17, 1977). See also the special section on the "Bernstein Debates" in *Die Neue Gesellschaft* 24.12 (1977), pp. 1,002–1,025; and H. Krehmendl, "Renaissance des Revisionismus. Ein Kongress der Friedrich Ebert Stiftung knüpft an das theoretische Erbe Eduard Bernsteins an," in *Vorwärts* (October 6, 1977).

omic democracy” was Bernstein’s conviction that socialism could indeed be reconciled with the core principles of liberal democracy, including the right to private property: “We [social democrats] do *not* abolish private property, we *limit* its rights. The total abolition of property is impossible.”¹¹⁸ As was the case in his theory of political democracy, Bernstein embedded his vision of economic democracy within a liberal discourse of rights: “The decisive point is not the fact *that* property is being acknowledged, but *what kind* of property is acknowledged and what rights are connected with property. Protection of acknowledged property is one of the conditions of a regulated social life and its socially regulated conditions of production. The opposite is not socialism, but anarchism.”¹¹⁹

Bernstein’s theoretical synthesis of liberalism and socialism understood as “evolutionary socialism” clearly employed liberal concepts not as “alien elements” intruding on the doctrinal purity of “real socialism,” but as essential features of *any* democratic socialism. Unfortunately, the SPD leadership took an ambivalent, and even hostile position toward his (re)vision until 1959, when it finally passed the non-Marxist Bad Godesberg Program. It will be the task of the following chapters to show why, during his lifetime, Bernstein’s quest for evolutionary socialism remained largely unfulfilled.

¹¹⁸ Bernstein, “Hat der Liberalismus eine Zukunft in Deutschland?,” *Bernstein A*, E112.

¹¹⁹ Eduard Bernstein, “Zwei politische Programm-Symphonien,” in *NZ* 15.2 (1896/97), pp. 334–335.

Part 3

Disappointment

6 Facing the critics

The campaign of the left

The 1899 publication of Bernstein's *The Preconditions of Socialism* caused a predictable uproar among Marxist intellectuals united in their rejection of the book's "eclectic" theoretical foundations aimed at "the conversion of social-democratic ideas into bourgeois ones."¹ As a clear sign that they were not planning to relinquish their interpretive monopoly on the meaning of socialism, orthodox Marxists fiercely defended the teleological philosophical framework of Marxist-Hegelianism, making it the yardstick for judging the "correctness" and "philosophical sophistication" of any competing socialist conception. By 1900, the term "revisionism" had assumed a clearly pejorative meaning in many socialist circles.

However, in criticizing Bernstein's alleged "intellectual shallowness," the guardians of Marxist orthodoxy soon ran into a number of serious practical problems. First, there was the question of what ought to be done to limit the damaging fallout of an ongoing, public discussion on the "meaning of Marxism," which threatened to unsettle the SPD's "official" Marxist ideology. Second, how could the party's leaders attack and discredit Bernstein without offending the bosses of Germany's rising free trade union movement? Naturally, Bebel was aware of Bernstein's close ties to the unions and the last thing he wanted was to spread the fires of discontent even further. Finally, given Bernstein's prominence as one of Europe's leading socialist thinkers, how could Bebel and Kautsky convince the ordinary party membership of Bernstein's sudden "intellectual lapse?" After all, until the outbreak of the revisionist controversy, Bernstein had routinely written in the major party publications on philosophical themes, problems of political economy, and the history of the labor movement – usually to the full satisfaction of the leadership. As late as 1900, Bernstein submitted as one of his last articles for Kautsky's *Neue Zeit* a learned book review of Karl Vorländer's edition of Immanuel

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class-Consciousness*, p. 182.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* – a subject Bernstein supposedly did not understand.² Many party functionaries knew that the late “General” himself had sung the praises of Bernstein’s grasp of theoretical matters, calling him “one of the best of the younger generation,”³ proudly presenting him and Kautsky as the “true pearls of German social democracy,”⁴ and the “most reliable representatives of Marxist theory.”⁵ In fact, Kautsky, too, had repeatedly defended Bernstein’s wit, referring to him as one of the major proponents of “true Marxism.” As late as 1897, Kautsky had sided with his friend against a charge mounted by British Marxist Belfort Bax, who had accused Bernstein of having “unconsciously ceased to be a social democrat.”⁶

Eventually, Bebel and Kautsky agreed to “contain” the *causa Bernstein* by affording his revisionist ideas a “safe” and open forum at national party conferences where Bebel could counterattack with binding anti-Bernstein resolutions, thereby preventing the uncontrolled spread of “wild debates” to local party organizations. Although some prominent party members secretly pressured Bernstein to resign his SPD membership for the sake of the “movement,” Bebel and Kautsky initially refused to meet Luxemburg’s radical demands for his public expulsion for fear of pushing Bernstein into forming a new party of “reformist socialism.” When Bernstein signalled his firm resolve to remain in the SPD, Bebel and Kautsky were forced to go full steam ahead with their potentially self-defeating anti-Bernstein crusade. Bebel suddenly “confessed” that he had never regarded his former friend as a man of exceptional intellectual abilities, conveniently “forgetting” that, less than twenty years before, he had himself recommended his “young, bright Berliner comrade” to serve as editor-in-chief of the main party organ. By openly denouncing Bernstein’s credentials as a party theorist and by questioning his political loyalty, Bebel and Kautsky gave other

² Eduard Bernstein, “Immanuel Kant’s Kritik der reinen Vernunft,” in *Neue Zeit* 18.1 (1899/1900), p. 255–260. For a critique of Bernstein’s “neo-Kantianism” by his socialist contemporaries, see, for example, Wolfgang Heine, “Eduard Bernstein und die politische Frage der Sozialdemokratie,” in *SM* 3.10 (October 1899), pp. 478–493; George Plekhanov, “Materialismus oder Kantianismus,” in *NZ* 17.1 (1898–1899), pp. 589–596; 626–632; and Karl Kautsky, “Problematisches gegen wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus,” in *NZ* 19.3 (1900/1901), pp. 355–364.

³ Engels to Sorge (October 4, 1890) *MEW* 37, p. 479.

⁴ Engels to Bebel (June 22, 1885) *Bebel BWE*, p. 228.

⁵ *Engels BWK*, p. 90. See also Engels’s remark that “Bebel and Bernstein are the only leaders who fully grasp the [political] situation” (Engels cited in *EB*, p. 32).

⁶ Karl Kautsky, “Was will und kann die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung leisten?” *NZ* 15.1 (1896/97), pp. 269–270. For an excellent account of Kautsky’s defense of Bernstein’s theoretical abilities, see Steenson, *Karl Kautsky: 1854–1938: Marxism in the Classical Years*, pp. 116–117.

prominent European social democrats the green light to follow their example.⁷

Their plan worked to perfection. Within three years, most Marxist theorists of some stature had published their own "Anti-Bernstein" tirades, defending the principles of "scientific socialism" against the "opportunistic attacks" of the "petty-bourgeois turncoat." A greatly reduced list of contributors to these early efforts aimed at exorcizing the spectre of revisionism from European social democracy would include such prominent names as Ernest Belfort Bax, H. M. Hyndman, the French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, Parvus, George Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, V. I. Lenin, the Dutch theorist, Anton Pannekoek, the Austrian socialist philosopher, Max Adler, and the SPD historian, Franz Mehring.

Appearing in the form of short essays or book-length monographs, this polemical avalanche gradually succeeded in undermining Bernstein's spotless former reputation as a gifted political thinker and deserving heir to Friedrich Engels. In its place, the orthodox tracts raised an almost grotesque effigy of Bernstein as a "theoretical simpleton" with a shallow grasp of philosophical matters and an "inadequate understanding of Marxian political economy."⁸ Aimed at saving orthodox Marxism from the potentially devastating effects of Bernstein's intervention, these early commentators pieced together a Bernstein portrait which, at least partially, survived until our time.

Kautsky started the onslaught on Bernstein's evolutionary socialism with his somewhat disappointing *Bernstein and the Social Democratic Program: An Anti-Critique*. Seeking to discredit both Bernstein's empirical findings and his theoretical conclusions, Kautsky made the surprising claim that Marxism had always officially rejected concepts such as the thesis of the inevitable collapse of capitalism or a "general theory of immiseration." For Kautsky, Bernstein was simply battling his own inventions.⁹ Altogether ignoring the source of these concepts – *The Communist Manifesto* – Kautsky also conveniently overlooked the fact that official party ideology had persistently fed the working class with catchphrases like "necessary collapse" and "inevitable immiseration," thus presenting the communist demands of 1848 in a *fin-de-siècle* context.¹⁰

But no essay contributed more to Bernstein's poor reputation than Rosa Luxemburg's monograph, *Reform or Revolution?* Lambasting

⁷ See, for example, Ernest Belfort Bax, "Our German Fabian Convert; or Socialism According to Bernstein," in *MS*, pp. 61–65.

⁸ Luxemburg, *Reform and Revolution?*, p. 39.

⁹ Kautsky, *Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm*, pp. 106, 136.

Bernstein for his “poor statistical skills” and his “childish” arguments, “Red Rosa” shrewdly mixed the quasi-religious, emotive force of Marx’s early writings with her own insightful structuralist explanation of revisionism. Employing Marx’s method of social analysis against Bernstein’s idealist “heresies,” Luxemburg presented revisionism as an “epiphenomenal reflection” of the current “opportunism in social democracy.”¹¹ In other words, she skillfully portrayed Bernstein’s intervention as the “superstructural effect” of a more profound problem at the economic base.¹² For Luxemburg, Bernstein’s revisionism was related to the old dispute between Marxists and opportunistic *Praktiker*. Evolutionary socialism amounted to nothing more than an unfortunate, but passing “petty-bourgeois vulgarization of Marxism,”¹³ caused by the worsening tensions and contradictions in the capitalist mode of production.

Heightening her structuralist account, Luxemburg asserted that Bernstein, living in British exile, was incapable of judging the political situation in Germany by simply gazing through his “tinted English spectacles.” Luxemburg thus appropriated the language of Ernest Belfort Bax, the British Marxist who had made similar claims three years earlier in the pages of the SDF journal *Justice*.¹⁴ Of course, there was neither mention that Marx had developed his own theory as the result of a life-long study of the economic history and conditions in England,¹⁵ nor that Engels had made his well-received comments on the German political situation from his comfortable house in London. Luxemburg’s wrath proved to be extremely selective, chiding only a particular London exile for serving as capitalism’s “unconscious predestined instrument,” thereby manifesting the mode “by means of which the rising working class expresses its momentary weakness.”¹⁶

In the end, however, Rosa Luxemburg proved to be too politically sophisticated simply to write off revisionism as an insignificant, short-lived historical phenomenon. Although she frequently emphasized the supposedly unoriginal, eclectic character of Bernstein’s “groundless critique,” a few less polemical passages clearly reveal her fear that Bernstein’s theory might give the “opportunistic current” in the SPD its “general theoretical expression; an attempt to elaborate its own theoretical conditions and to break with scientific socialism.”¹⁷ In other words, Luxemburg implicitly acknowledged that Bernstein, even in his early

¹¹ Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*, pp. 58–59.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 35–37, 58–60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Bax, “Our German Fabian Convert; or Socialism According to Bernstein,” in *MS*, p. 64.

¹⁵ Friedrich Engels, “Preface” to the English edition of Marx, C I, p. 6.

¹⁶ Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?*, p. 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

revisionist phase, went beyond a purely negative project of simply “deconstructing” Marxism by offering at least the bare outlines of his own constructive socialist theory.

Though lacking Luxemburg’s formal education (she had obtained a doctorate in political economy from the University of Zurich), Bernstein, like most leading socialist thinkers of his time, was perfectly capable of discussing broadly conceived philosophical issues and matters of *political theory* in the context of the pressing practical demands of the labor movement. Obviously, the motive behind the flood of pamphlets and books that questioned his intellectual ability was not a sudden qualitative drop in Bernstein’s own writings, but their threat to the ideological authority of “Marxist scriptures.” Nonetheless, one must concede that Bernstein failed to carry his critique to its logical end, completing his break with Marxism, and perhaps even found a new social-liberal party.¹⁸ For a variety of reasons, he seemed to waver in his criticism in the months following the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism* – a tactic that often resulted in deliberately vague theoretical formulations.¹⁹ Bernstein’s hesitancy translated into his vexing theoretical oscillation between rejecting and revising Marxist doctrine, thus making him deservedly vulnerable to harsh judgments regarding his ideological position.

At the 1899 Hannover Party Conference, Bernstein’s “heresies” dominated the proceedings even more than they had the year before. Moreover, the French “Millerand Affair” added some spice to the ensuing theoretical debates over the nature of Bernstein’s revisionism. Only a few months preceding the party conference, Alexandre Millerand, a prominent member of the French Independent Socialist Party, had decided to join the “bourgeois” cabinet of France’s liberal Prime Minister Waldeck-Rousseau, taking this unprecedented step without seeking prior consultation with his party’s leadership. While a number of French party leaders and other small reformist workers’ groups openly supported Millerand’s move, the anarchist Left and the Jules Guesde’s revolutionary Marxists protested against Millerand’s violation of the “basic socialist tradition,” which prohibited any committed socialist from joining a non-socialist government. Ultimately, the 1900 Paris Congress of the Second International “resolved” the dilemma by merging Guesde’s demands with the rather vague language drafted by Kautsky, which permitted exceptions to this rule only under poorly specified conditions relating to the “protection of the achievements of the working class.”

¹⁸ See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, “An meine sozialistischen Kritiker,” p. 4; and “Der Marx- Cultus und das Recht der Revision,” p. 255.

¹⁹ See also Pachter, “The Ambiguous Legacy of Eduard Bernstein,” in Bronner, *Socialism in History*, p. 258.

Eager to avoid a similar conflict in the SPD, Kautsky and Bebel refrained from raising the "Millerand Case" at the Hannover Conference, thus foregoing the opportunity to challenge Bernstein's public approval of the French minister's decision. In his memorable opening speech lasting more than six hours, Bebel brilliantly displayed his double-pronged strategy *vis-à-vis* the lingering "Bernstein Question." Pandering to the atheoretical *Praktiker* and a small group of theoretically committed "revisionists," he spent the first hour extolling the virtues of free speech and socialist self-criticism. But he soon began to elaborate on the "pitfalls of reformism," clearly regurgitating Kautsky's arguments designed to undermine Bernstein's intellectual ability.²⁰ Bebel indicated that any attempt to rob social democracy of its revolutionary tradition was a blow to the heart of his own staunch opposition to the existing system. Those who abandoned "revolution" in favor of "evolution" had allowed themselves to be coopted by the bourgeoisie and displayed their willingness to compromise with the existing authoritarian state of Kaiser Wilhelm. To the enthusiastic applause of almost 200 delegates, Bebel closed his rhetorical *tour de force* with a characteristically fiery admonition: "Let's stick with our goal of [capitalist] expropriation. This we'll never give up!"²¹

Bernstein's pending arrest warrant prevented him once again from defending himself in person. But as in Stuttgart the year before, his position was well represented by a group of prominent revisionists led by Eduard David and Heinrich Peus. Both men emphasized the importance of synchronizing the party's theory and its practice without abandoning the theoretical and ethical concerns of a committed socialism. According to David, Bernstein's main contribution was to remind the party of the fundamental importance of its present-day tasks (*Gegenwartsarbeit*), its growing parliamentary activities, and its ethical responsibilities to its constituency. According to Peus, Bernstein was to be commended for formulating an evolutionary socialism that might well serve as "a means for the organic construction of a socialist future."²²

In the ensuing confrontations between the two camps which lasted for almost five days, Bernstein's theoretical position was alternately condemned and defended. Ultimately, however, Bebel used his central position in the party's "old boy network," along with his conciliatory demeanor and "commonsensical" calls for party unity, to appear as the peacemaker. Thanking Bernstein for his "bold initiative" and firmly rejecting radical

²⁰ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag des Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten in Hannover vom 9-14 Oktober 1899* (Berlin, 1899), pp. 94-127.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 186.

calls for his expulsion, Bebel offered a final resolution that affirmed the Marxist principles of the Erfurt Program. The document also emphasized the proletarian-class character of the party and rejected any “revisionist” attempts to turn the SPD into a “social democratic party of reform.”²³ The measure carried by an overwhelming margin.

In the end, Kautsky and Bebel had achieved a hard-fought victory, but the war was not yet won. Undeterred, Bernstein would further develop his revisionist arguments and challenge Kautsky’s narrowly interpreted proletarian *Weltanschauung*. Ultimately, Kautsky lost his strategic moderation and ask Bernstein to leave the party, since he obviously “never really understood Marxism.”²⁴ A deep personal friendship and remarkable intellectual kinship of twenty years had come to a bitter end. This was the moment for which a small number of left-liberals sympathetic to the workers’ cause had waited. Could Bernstein be recruited for a new, worker-based national-liberal party of reform?

Liberal overtures

Already before the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein had been inundated with congratulatory letters from left-liberals like the neo-Kantian philosopher Karl Vorländer who praised his “courageous initiative.” Though disagreeing with Bernstein’s epistemology, many neo-Kantian socialists saw the London exile as a potential ally in their mounting efforts to replace the party’s orthodox Marxist doctrine with their own ethical brand of socialism based upon Kant’s Critical Idealism.²⁵ Indeed, the powerful surge of neo-Kantian socialism in the first decades of the new century owed much to Bernstein’s revisionist intervention.

Likewise, prominent social-liberal economists like Franz Oppenheimer began to quote Bernstein in support of their cause, flooding him with attractive offers for closer intellectual and organizational cooperation. Politically, Oppenheimer was close to a relatively disorganized group of small parties collectively called the left-liberals. Theodor Barth, a Bremen delegate to the *Bundesrat*, and charismatic leader of the most progressive left liberal party – the *Freisinnige Vereinigung* (Liberal Association) – had in the past unsuccessfully called for the formation of a “red” *Kartell*: a loose electoral alliance between the left-liberals and the social democrats.²⁶ Indeed, the left-liberals shared with the social democrats their strong

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 294.

²⁴ Kautsky to Adler (May 6, 1901) *Adler BW*, p. 355.

²⁵ See Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, p. 99.

²⁶ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, pp. 28–29.

interest in organizing workers and artisans in trade unions, called the Hirsch-Duncker *Gewerkvereine*. Though one of the oldest unions in Germany, the liberal *Gewerkvereine* were clearly outmuscled in size and political power by the social democratic “free” trade unions. Moreover, left-liberal members of the Reichstag frequently voted with the social democrats against military and colonial bills that failed to benefit their constituency.

While the political platform of left-liberal parties traditionally attracted small businessmen, teachers, lawyers, and lower civil servants, their membership also included traditional opponents of socialism: representatives of large-scale commerce and finance. These members of the German *Grossbürgertum* (upper bourgeoisie) vigorously opposed the Conservative/Junker strategy of maintaining political power by turning against industrialism. In particular, left-liberals emerged as strong critics of establishing artificial economic measures such as protective tariffs, export premiums, and agricultural subsidies, which were hurting the commercial communities in the large northern German cities and small businessmen in Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, and Oldenburg.²⁷

Aware of their respective parties’ common roots in opposing the authoritarianism and militarism of the Empire, Bernstein at first seemed to reciprocate Oppenheimer’s overtures by explicitly welcoming a stronger emphasis on the “liberal element” in socialism. In fact, he conceded that some theoretical principles of Oppenheimer’s left liberalism were not in contradiction to social democratic tenets as he understood them.²⁸ However, Bernstein was unwilling to go along with Oppenheimer’s undiluted enthusiasm for economic *laissez-faire* policies and his neo-Smithian supposition that the free play of economic competition itself would eventually bring about both greater national wealth and a more “cooperative” variant of capitalism. Rejecting the economic extremes of Oppenheimer’s left liberalism, Bernstein’s liberal socialism instead stood for significant state interventionist policies for sizeable sectors of the economy.²⁹ Ultimately, the two men were unable to overcome their fundamental philosophical differences on this issue, and their correspondence ceased abruptly.

Friedrich Naumann, the powerful leader of the center-left German National-Social Association (*Nationalsozialer Verein*), also showed some interest in moving the progressive parts of the German bourgeoisie closer to Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism. Greatly influenced by Max Weber,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

²⁸ Eduard Bernstein, “Zum Thema Sozialliberalismus und Collectivismus,” in *SM* 4 (1900), p. 183.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Naumann emerged as one of the most prominent non-socialist advocates for the “modernization” and democratization of the Empire. With a strong background in the Protestant Christian Social movement for social reform, he was a keen observer and critic of the social dislocation and economic hardship connected with Germany’s rapid process of modernization and industrialization. In his *magnum opus*, *Demokratie und Kaisertum*, published in 1900, Naumann had laid out his comprehensive theoretical vision for challenging the domination of the Conservatives and affecting a reconciliation between democracy and Empire.³⁰ Noting that the agriculturally based Junkers were a formidable obstacle in Germany’s “assured” way to global greatness, Naumann put his faith in the growing “modern” commercial and industrial classes which, he felt, had to be rallied around an anti-Conservative political agenda. Naumann’s innovative political scheme involved combining the forces of liberal nationalism and democracy in a progressive, class-transcending alliance “From Bassermann to Bebel” – a policy he officially announced at the 1901 party congress of his *Nationalsozialer Verein*.³¹

However, unlike Barth and other left-liberals, Naumann shared Max Weber’s overriding concern with *Weltpolitik*: a politics that subordinated all domestic goals to “national interest” and the increase of Germany’s power on the international stage. Thus, Naumann saw it as his main task to appeal to the “internationalist” left-liberals and social democrats to give up their “unrealistic” opposition to a “national” politics, while at the same time pressuring the center-right national-liberals to ease their hostility to both the social democrats and a democratic framework for a future German Reich. And indeed, it appeared as though both parties were slowly moving in that direction. The national-liberals elected as their chairman the moderate Ernst Bassermann, who was socially progressive and tried to reinvokethe grand old liberal tradition of his party. His efforts were supported by scores of so-called Young Liberal Clubs which sprang up throughout the country and were led by young, liberal-thinking activists like Gustav Stresemann.³²

Even some social democratic *Praktiker* appeared to be attracted to Naumann’s ideas: Otto Hué, the powerful leader of the Ruhr area miners’ union, found himself so enthralled with Naumann’s arguments in *Demokratie und Kaisertum*, that he organized a well-attended lecture tour through the Ruhr for the author.³³ With Bernstein’s *The Preconditions of*

³⁰ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 22.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 33–43. See also Karola Bassermann, *Ernst Bassermann* (Mannheim: Dr Haas, 1919); and J. Alden Nichols, *Germany after Bismarck* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958).

³³ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 20.

Socialism appearing roughly around the same time as *Demokratie und Kaisertum*, Naumann assumed that the full transformation of social democracy along reformist lines was only a matter of time and interpreted the unfolding Revisionist Controversy as a clear sign of socialism's willingness to drop its "old revolutionary phraseology."³⁴ Triumphantly announcing to his readers that "Bernstein is our farthest advanced post in the camp of social democracy," he enthusiastically welcomed Bernstein's study as the "new political ideal of a democratic Left."³⁵ Sending Bernstein the galley proofs of his *Demokratie und Kaisertum* with the polite request for a favorable review, Naumann saw their correspondence as the beginning of a new era of cooperation between liberalism and the reformist camp within social democracy.

There was indeed some reason for Naumann's optimism. Bernstein shared his advocacy for a closer cooperation between liberals and socialists in order to achieve various democratic goals, and he had pressured the social democratic leadership to espouse such a "policy of cooperation" as a matter of principle. In that sense, Bernstein's evolutionary socialism corresponded to a certain degree with Naumann's scheme to create a "grand bloc" from Bassermann to Bebel. However, the socialist revisionist clearly disappointed Naumann's *Weltpolitik* ambitions by failing to warm up to his nationalist arguments. In his overall critical review of *Demokratie und Kaisertum*, Bernstein condemned Naumann for his "anglophobia" and brought him up for his lack of understanding of British trade policy. Disappointed and humiliated, Naumann retreated and decided to drop Bernstein for the time being.³⁶ But it should be noted that Bernstein's article was aimed as much against those "revisionists" in his own party who were using his arguments to justify their nationalistic ambitions, as it was against Naumann's brand of German nationalism.

By far the most serious attempt to win Bernstein over to the liberal camp came from Heinrich Braun, a sympathizer with social democracy, and editor of the influential left-liberal political journals *Archiv für Soziale Gesetzgebung und Statistik* and *Centralblatt*. Braun hoped that Bernstein's soft spot for liberalism would finally provide the necessary impetus to a

³⁴ Friedrich Naumann, *Demokratie und Kaisertum* (Berlin: Hilfe Verlag, 1900), p. 7. For Naumann's relationship with Max Weber, see Michael Panzer, *Der Einfluss Max Webers auf Friedrich Naumann* (Würzburg: Creator, 1986).

³⁵ Friedrich Naumann's review of Bernstein's *The Preconditions of Socialism* in *Hilfe* 5.4 (1899), p. 4. See also Karl Korsch, "The Passing of Marxist Orthodoxy: Bernstein – Kautsky–Luxemburg–Lenin," in Douglas Kellner, ed. *Revolutionary Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 176.

³⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "Socialdemokratie und Imperialismus," in *SM* 4 (1900), pp. 238–251. See also Peter Theiner, *Sozialer Liberalismus und deutsche Weltpolitik: Friedrich Naumann im Wilhelminischen Deutschland, 1860–1919* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1983), pp. 102–105.

“far-reaching internal transformation of the [socialist] party.”³⁷ Seeking to give Bernstein’s revisionism a greater forum, Braun contacted the London exile, unveiling his plan for a new journal which would employ social-scientific research in analyzing the practical problems of the labor movement. Hoping his new project would provide the dynamic spark required to light the fires of a broad-based reformist socialism, Braun wrote to Bernstein: “It is not only important that you personally speak to our audience but that a whole current of scientific expression and practical influence be represented. We must take positions on the problems of the day, . . . [hence] the idea of a new journal, in which all the adherents of the new direction come together.”³⁸

When Braun failed to secure the necessary funds for his new project, he invited Bernstein to contribute to his *Archiv* on a regular basis in order to give the publication a “clearer socialist direction.” Before Bernstein was able to come to a final decision on this matter, Braun managed to win over a number of influential left-liberal editors for another project involving the creation of a social-liberal weekly. As a theoretical “organ of battle,” the paper was designed to help “free social democracy from its rigid Marxist dogmatism” and contribute to the “great expansion and deepening of socialist ideas.”³⁹ Considering his publication as the crucial bridge between left-liberal activists and “evolutionary socialists,” Braun succeeded in securing the necessary funds from Charles Hallgarten, a wealthy sympathizer. Predictably, Bebel and Kautsky strongly criticized Braun’s initiative, while revisionists like Paul Göhre – an influential religious socialist and regular contributor to the “revisionist” journal *Sozialistische Monatshefte* – and Wolfgang Heine promised their support.⁴⁰

Initially, Bernstein endorsed the project, but upon returning to Germany, he realized that his enthusiasm for Braun and his ideas had been misguided. Recognizing that Braun’s plan was deliberately designed to enhance intra-party tensions which could lead to a split in the labor movement, he distanced himself from the proposed project.⁴¹ Bernstein’s decision clearly shows that while he was prepared to provide the crucial theoretical foundation for a liberal-socialist current *within* social democracy, he was unwilling to play any role in Braun’s separatist political agenda. In the end, the “Braun episode” helped Bernstein to clarify his own political plans and strengthen his commitment to his new theoretical

³⁷ Braun to Sombart (December 13, 1900) in Julie Braun-Vogelstein, *Heinrich Braun* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1967), p. 134.

³⁸ Braun cited in Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, pp. 151–152.

³⁹ Braun cited in *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

role as a revisionist thinker within the confines of the German labor movement. Disappointed in Bernstein's surprising turnabout, Braun complained about the latter's "lacking character and insight," and vowed to carry his struggle against Marxist orthodoxy straight into the lion's den. Within a matter of weeks, Braun joined the SPD in the hope of mobilizing other revisionist intellectuals.⁴²

By 1900, it became clear that the combination of Bernstein's hesitancy and sense of loyalty to his party had prevented him from fulfilling the expectations of a small faction of intellectual revisionists who had looked to him to lead their offensive against the orthodox party leadership. Auer's assessment of Bernstein's weakness as a political leader and his willingness to subordinate personal ambitions to party interests, proved to be right on the mark: "Good Ol' Ede is a loyal comrade with whom I've fought shoulder to shoulder; but he surely is no new messiah. As long as he remains the leader of the so-called 'revisionists' we can all rest in peace, for he will make sure that they never hit the jackpot."⁴³ Two decades later, Gustav Mayer, a prominent historian of the German labor movement, concurred with Auer's semi-facetious observations:

Even in his young years, Bernstein lacked the qualities of a statesman . . . He is too unpragmatic, too thoughtful; he has never been an *homme d'action*. He is not a charismatic speaker of Bebel's or Jaurès's caliber who can excite the masses; and even less does he make a fine diplomat who must be a master of hiding his true intentions.⁴⁴

Reactions of the bourgeois press

Since the outbreak of the Revisionist Controversy, the bourgeois press had been feasting delightedly on the public display of the disputes raging within social democracy. Bernstein's noted 1901 lecture objecting to "scientific socialism" provided them with even more fodder. Surpassing all earlier plaudits, Bernstein's lecture received wide coverage in major conservative and bourgeois newspapers like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Deutsche Zeitung*. Much to his discomfort, Bernstein was portrayed as the stalwart supporter of non-socialist liberalism and a politics of moderation which inherently conflicted with the Marxist leadership of the SPD. Heaping exaggerated praise on Bernstein's political "boldness," these newspapers succeeded in putting their own ideological spin on his

⁴² Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, pp. 152–156.

⁴³ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Dresden vom 13–20 September 1903* (Berlin, 1903), pp. 364–366.

⁴⁴ Mayer cited in *EB*, pp. 198–199.

message. Claiming that he had “shattered the entire foundation of Marxist theory,” and that he was heroically fighting the “non-conciliatory course charted out by radical SPD leaders,” most conservative and national-liberal journalists deliberately aimed at adding fuel to the fires of discontent then raging within the labor movement.⁴⁵ Bernstein’s steadfast denials and angry disclaimers notwithstanding, such reports did, in fact, contain a kernel of truth.

On the other hand, Werner Sombart and a number of other academic “Socialists of the Lectern” derided Bernstein’s revisionist theses for their “commonsensical,” “eclectic” philosophical foundations. It seemed that Sombart was emulating Luxemburg’s terminology from the bourgeois Right: “Opportunist socialism offers very little theory. Indeed, the fact that it avoids theory altogether represents its most essential trait.”⁴⁶ Confusing Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism with the atheoretical reformism of the party *Praktiker*, Sombart’s misjudgment proved nonetheless to be extremely influential, for it was reiterated in numerous later assessments, including, most importantly, in Joseph Schumpeter’s famous treatise, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.⁴⁷

The bourgeois reviews of Bernstein’s writings contributed to the significant growth of attention to his revisionist ideas within academic circles. Like their Marxist counterparts, early academic studies of Bernstein’s political thought in the form of journal articles and doctoral dissertations focused narrowly on the relationship between revisionism and Marxist doctrine at the expense of a more systematic presentation of Bernstein’s entire political thought and its relationship to modern political theory.⁴⁸ Celebrating what they considered to be the hitherto most successful attack on revolutionary Marxism from within German social democracy itself, most academic authors concentrated exclusively on the political ramifications of Bernstein’s Marx critique on the unity of the labor movement.

When in the course of his botched literary project with Braun, Bernstein consciously stopped short of pushing his critique to a wholesale rejection of Marxism, bourgeois “sympathies” for him quickly waned. The great majority of non-socialist commentators began to look upon him as just

⁴⁵ Dieter Fricke, “Die Rückkehr Eduard Bernsteins in das Deutsche Reich 1901,” in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 22.12 (1974), p. 1345.

⁴⁶ Werner Sombart, *Der Proletarische Sozialismus*, vol. I (Jena, 1924), p. 386.

⁴⁷ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976). Schumpeter, too, appropriates Luxemburg’s analysis by claiming that “Bernstein did not fully understand his [Marx’s] economic interpretation of history” (p. 347).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Ernst Günther, *Die revisionistische Bewegung in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie, Teil I: Die allgemeinen theoretischen Grundlagen* (PhD dissertation, Freiburg/Breisgau, 1905).

another, perhaps even more “dangerous,” leftist opponent. It slowly began to dawn on a number of the more thoughtful journalists that Engels’ former right-hand man had not given up on socialist theory at all. Rather, as they saw it, he had chosen a shrewd double-pronged strategy of slowly disentangling socialist theory from revolutionary Marxism while still claiming the “evolutionary legacy” of Marx and Engels. When Robert Brunhuber, a prominent academic and editor of the center-right *Kölnischen Zeitung*, attacked Bernstein along these lines, he drew a fierce response in the form of an impressive series of articles in the *Rheinischen Zeitung*, in which Bernstein defended the coherence of his revisionist stance on the basis of traditional socialist principles. These essays were later collected and published in a separate monograph, entitled *The Theory and Practice of Modern Social Democracy*.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, the growing suspicion of the bourgeois press was understandable, for Bernstein was clearly engaged in the process of laying the foundations of a new, “liberal” socialism – a potentially more alluring, but equally threatening theoretical alternative to revolutionary Marxism.⁵⁰ In the minds of many conservative observers, there was a good chance that Bernstein might succeed in supplying social democracy with the theoretical foundation for its possible redefinition as a democratic “people’s party,” thus extending its electoral appeal beyond narrow class parameters. An astute observation made by a national-liberal German journalist nicely captures the bourgeoisie’s increasingly ambivalent attitude toward Bernstein:

The logical outcome of all that Bernstein stands for should be a break with the principles of Marxism – the materialist conception of history, the theory of surplus value, and the principles and strategy of the SPD. However, for understandable tactical reasons, Bernstein refuses to finish this break by tearing apart the whole Marxist edifice. Instead, he shrewdly pretends that his theory helps “evolving” Marxism. In other words, Bernstein ultimately proclaims that it is after all Marx who reasserts himself against Marx.⁵¹

Austin F. Harrison, a liberal contributor to the British *Fortnightly Review*, the journal of the British Benthamites, shared the assessment of his German colleague. In his 1902 article, “Socialism and Bernstein,” he noted, “Bernstein simply criticizes Marxist dogma without necessarily subverting the whole structure.”⁵² Harrison’s essay represents a typical

⁴⁹ Eduard Bernstein, *Die heutige Sozialdemokratie in Theorie und Praxis* (Munich: Birk, 1905).

⁵⁰ Max Lorenz, “Marx–Bernstein–Kautsky,” in *Preussische Jahrbücher* 96 (1899), p. 344.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁵² Austin Harrison, “Socialism and Bernstein,” in *Fortnightly Review* 71 (1902), p. 137.

example of the new wave of negative assessments of Bernstein's theoretical model from bourgeois journalists who had often unwittingly entangled themselves in the terminology of Bernstein's radical opponents: "Where Marx is fatalistic, Bernstein is opportunist."⁵³ Moreover, Harrison developed an argument which was to become a common feature of the dominant interpretation of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism. Claiming that Bernstein's important essays on scientific socialism "contained little that had not already been suggested in his previous work," the British writer assumed an early closure on Bernstein's contribution to socialist thought.⁵⁴ Writing in 1902, Harrison mistakenly considered Bernstein's theoretical achievements already a thing of the past.

Yet, like Rosa Luxemburg, the British observer could not help but acknowledge the obvious constructive ramifications emerging from Bernstein's attack on Marxist historicism and economic determinism. Indeed, Harrison referred to Bernstein's theoretical efforts as instrumental in creating an attractive "vista of purified rational socialism" which acknowledged the role of the individual and the importance of free agency in the realm of politics.⁵⁵ Finding Bernstein's "valiant efforts" to combat Marxist dogmatism "worthwhile," Harrison added that revisionism might turn out to be just as utopian in its vision as Marxism. While Marxism glorified insurrectionary violence, Bernstein's evolutionary socialism might eventually disintegrate into pure opportunism.⁵⁶

To his credit, Harrison's conclusion proved to be extremely prophetic. He managed to touch upon the three fundamental predicaments of twentieth-century socialist theory which were brought into sharper focus by Bernstein's new perspective: the faltering Marxist monopoly on the meaning of socialism; the necessary clarification of the relationship between liberalism and socialism; and the problem of the instrumentalist ("opportunist") impulse inherent in *any* reformism.

The return to Germany

At the height of the Revisionist Controversy, Kautsky and Bebel had terminated Bernstein's position as a regular contributor to *Vorwärts*. A few months later, they succeeded in pressuring him to resign from his post as London correspondent of *Neue Zeit*. Deprived of a large portion of his income, Bernstein briefly contemplated accepting a financially attractive journalistic position in South Africa, but ultimately decided to remain in Europe. His perseverance was rewarded soon after in the form of an

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

excellent position with the burgeoning journal, *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (The Socialist Monthly), edited by his party comrade Joseph Bloch, an open sympathizer with the revisionist cause.⁵⁷ A few years later, Bernstein expanded his journalistic activities by assuming the position of Berlin correspondent of the left-liberal London weekly, *The Nation*.

Bernstein's professional relationship to *Sozialistische Monatshefte* and its various "revisionist" contributors, ranging in ideology from "nationalist socialists" to "ethical socialists," signified the beginning of a new phase in his intellectual development: the formulation of his "mature" revisionism, refined in the course of many years in response to both theoretical challenges and practical problems arising from the daily business of observing, organizing, and coordinating the activities of a mass movement. Though not recognized by the SPD as an "official party organ," Bloch's journal was widely read by party members and soon surpassed the circulation of Kautsky's *Neue Zeit*. Over the next fifteen years, Bernstein published some of his most important theoretical essays in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*. No doubt, Bloch and his staff provided Bernstein with an appropriate public forum for his political ideas.

Soon after Bernstein joined *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, his ideological *Wende* found its external expression in a dramatic change in his private life. Paul Nathan, a left-liberal editor, and his old friend, party secretary Ignaz Auer (who had both worked secretly for years on getting his arrest warrant repealed), managed to orchestrate Bernstein's return to Germany. Their extensive lobbying efforts finally paid off when German Chancellor Prince Bernhard von Bülow reluctantly agreed to let Bernstein's arrest warrant lapse in the hope that his return to Germany would continue to test the organizational strength of the labor movement. Conservative journalists praised von Bülow's shrewd move, and, in seeking to intensify the SPD's predicament, demanded that Bernstein be given a teaching post at a major university.⁵⁸ However, the suggestion that a "socialist autodidact" should receive preferential treatment so aroused the wrath of the academic establishment, that serious negotiations regarding a possible appointment were never initiated. It was not until after World War I that Bernstein would be invited to give extensive guest lectures at the University of Berlin.

Having grown deeply attached to their life in England as well as their

⁵⁷ *Sozialistische Monatshefte* proclaimed itself "an independent organ for all viewpoints based on the common ground of socialism." Originating as a periodical of socialist academics, SM ultimately advanced to become one of the most significant journals of pre-World War I German social democracy. For a more detailed history of SM, see Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*; and Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912*.

⁵⁸ Helmuth von Gerlach in *Welt am Montag* (May 20, 1901).

numerous social acquaintances in London, the first reaction of the Bernsteins to the “good news” from Germany was “less joy than dismay, and the subsequent farewell to London was truly grievous to both of us.”⁵⁹ Bernstein clearly was of two minds on this issue: on one hand, he cherished the thought of becoming actively involved in the German labor movement again, while on the other, he felt a genuine affection for the flair of late-Victorian Britain. After a lavish farewell dinner organized in Bernstein’s honor by labor leader Ramsay MacDonald, Ede and Gine set out for an uncertain future in their home country, eventually settling in a sleepy Berlin suburb.

Although the SPD leadership officially welcomed back their “battle-tested comrade,” Bernstein’s new role in the party was far from clear. After all, he had not been a major player on the domestic scene for over twenty years. Deprived of his valuable contacts with the major party publications and shunned by most of his former friends, the fifty-year-old socialist veteran did not even hold an official position within the party. What would his future role be? Could he afford to continue his criticism without facing still more serious sanctions from Bebel and Kautsky?

One thing was certain: during these first months of the new century, Bernstein expressed no fixed plans or clear intentions, choosing instead to adopt a cautious strategy of responding to developments as they unfolded. And indeed, within two years of his return, Bernstein slipped into his dual role in the German labor movement: leading revisionist theorist and elected Reichstag representative.

The practical dimension: the *Reichstag* representative

Bernstein’s first major public appearance in Germany evoked yet another hostile reaction from the orthodox party leadership. In his above-mentioned 1901 Berlin lecture, “How Is Scientific Socialism Possible?,” he addressed a mixed audience comprised of university professors, students, and members of the interested public.⁶⁰ As indicated in chapter 4, Bernstein came to the conclusion that, since both socialist theory and practice were pervaded by speculative idealism, no socialism could claim to be totally value-free: Marx’s and Engels’ “scientific socialism” was a misnomer. A few months later, Bernstein further elaborated on his position with two crucial rejoinders in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* to French

⁵⁹ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, p. 280.

⁶⁰ The same year also saw the publication of a voluminous collection of his essays, entitled *The Theory and History of Socialism*, which included several of his 1896–98 *Neue Zeit* essays, as well as a number of new pieces.

and German socialist critics of his lecture. Up until the 1920s, Bernstein would periodically revisit this crucial theme, seeking to connect basic epistemological questions with political and ethical problems arising from the practical imperatives of the labor movement.⁶¹

Angered by the new outburst of negative publicity stemming from Bernstein's Berlin lecture, the SPD leadership decided to forestall any damaging effects to the party's basis. The "Kantian" views expressed in Bernstein's attack on scientific socialism drew a series of swift condemnations from the cardinals of SPD orthodoxy. At the 1901 Lübeck Party Congress, for the third time in four years, Bernstein's transgressions dominated the party's agenda. Though Bebel and Kautsky continued to defend the purity of Marxist theory, the 1901 proceedings made it abundantly clear that the party's "revisionist faction" was not only there to stay, but that it had expanded and subdivided into a number of diverging currents. For orthodox Marxists, the overriding objective was to assure effective "damage control" by preventing a further escalation of divisive theoretical discussions.

This time Bebel ascended to the rostrum only briefly in order to recite a list of Bernstein's newly committed theoretical "sins," namely exaggerated skepticism, one-sided criticism of the SPD while neglecting to attack the bourgeois "enemy" with equal forcefulness, lack of conceptual clarity, and "incorrect" exposition of Marxist theory. But overall, the charges brought against the "arch-revisionist" reflected a clear change in the party leader's strategy *vis-à-vis* Bernstein. Merely calling his liberal revision of socialism "a theory that lacks conceptual clarity" indicates Bebel's intention to downplay the enormity of Bernstein's new socialist conception for the sake of party unity. Obviously, Bebel was not interested in prolonging the debate on Bernstein and Marxist theory; hence, his new eagerness to move on to less controversial items on the conference agenda. Exhorting Bernstein to stop his theoretical "nit-picking," Bebel's exasperation with the lingering problem of revisionism even expressed itself in an uncharacteristically anti-Semitic outburst, when he accused Bernstein of indulging in "long-winded, Talmudic sophistries."⁶²

Countering the charges of Marxist orthodoxy for the first time in person, Bernstein stubbornly defended his revisionist views in two short speeches emphasizing the empirical observations underlying his theoretical convictions. Announcing that he was not suggesting a new party

⁶¹ See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, "Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision," pp. 19–26; "Allerhand Werttheoretisches," pp. 221–224, 270–274, 367–372, 463–468, 555–559; "Bildung, Wissenschaft, und Partei," p. 706; "Wissenschaft, Werturteile und Partei," pp. 1,407–1,415; and Bernstein, *Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, pp. 11–38.

⁶² *SPD Protokoll, 1901 Lübeck*, p. 168.

strategy, Bernstein pleaded with the party to acknowledge the need for ideological “modernization” and finally drop Marxist dogmas that had seen their day. Most of all, he appealed directly to Bebel to let go of a theory based on fictive economic catastrophies. Adding that “the time will come when social democracy will be proud of my revisionist intervention,” Bernstein insisted that he had nothing to retract.⁶³ Quoting his friend and mentor Engels, he ended his passionate *apologia* with an appeal to the “unalienable” right to free criticism, and urged his comrades to protect the democratic process of open discussions on all relevant issues.

As might be expected, many delegates shared Bebel’s desire to get revisionism off the agenda by forging a lasting compromise. In the end, they placed their trust in Bebel’s political experience and his tested strategy of supporting some autonomy for Marxist theorists while leaving “politicians” like himself or the *Praktiker* sufficient leeway for their political manoeuvring. Seeking to appease both camps, the conference delegates passed a resolution upholding the “right to criticism” while also admonishing Bernstein to stop his “one-sided attacks on the party.” Overall, the Lübeck Congress amounted to a revisionist victory of some sorts: the number of delegates – thirty-one – voting openly against Bebel’s resolution was significantly higher than it had been two years before. As passed, the “anti-revisionist” documents represented a merely symbolic rebuke of Bernstein in the interest of party unity. Indeed, the resolutions were not a punitive vote of censure but a tactical corrective aimed at accommodating an openly reformist faction that could no longer be denied its theoretical expression. Still maintaining that he had been wronged, Bernstein reluctantly accepted the gentle reprimand. Relieved that this new controversy had been overcome without grave consequences, even some of Bernstein’s most vehement opponents rose to shake his hand. His new intellectual role as the SPD’s central theorist of socialist “revisionism” had been solidified.

Soon after the Congress, Bernstein was suddenly confronted with the possibility of assuming an important political function. Presented with a clear sign of his popularity in its more moderate circles, he received two offers from local party leaders to run for Reichstag representative in their relatively “safe” socialist electoral districts. Surprised by the speed of unfolding events and psychologically unprepared for an exhaustive electoral campaign, Bernstein rejected the honor. But in 1902, when the premature death of his revisionist comrade Bruno Schönknecht created a vacant seat representing the city of Breslau, the provincial capital of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–145; 179.

Silesia, Bernstein accepted the nomination and won a resounding electoral victory that even surprised his enemies.⁶⁴

Considering that anonymous socialist leaflets distributed during the primaries were spreading nasty rumors – according to which he was either a secret monarchist with connections to the British royal family and/or a bald-faced “national-liberal” fighting for the expansion of the German Empire – Bernstein’s electoral triumph must have been especially sweet.⁶⁵ His socialist enemies had seriously underestimated his remarkable ability to develop a strong rapport with local party leaders, trade unions, and the working-class electorate. For many ordinary SPD voters, a large part of the appeal of candidates like Bernstein had little to do with their theoretical work; rather, it lay in Bernstein’s non-academic working-class background. Ordinary workers appreciated the success of a “genuine proletarian” who, like their hero Bebel, had elevated himself to a leading position in the party.⁶⁶

For Bernstein, the time of transition had come to an end. Again firmly rooted in the German labor movement, he added a significant practical dimension to his theoretical endeavors, a feat rarely achieved by other party theorists. Save for two short interruptions, Bernstein served in the German Reichstag until 1928 as the social democratic representative of Breslau, and later, Berlin. In addition, he held the non-salaried office of city councillor in his residential Berlin suburb for a number of years. Soon advancing to become one of the leading policy experts in the party’s parliamentary *Fraktion*, Bernstein used his professional banking experience to specialize in issues of taxation, international trade, foreign affairs, and constitutional law.⁶⁷ Over the next ten years, he published several studies on tax policy and helped popularize his party’s blueprint for a more equitable and responsible tax system.⁶⁸

As advocated by the German labor movement, such a social democratic tax and budget policy supported redistributive measures in favor of drastically lowering direct and indirect taxation on working-class incomes

⁶⁴ Helmut Neubach, “Von Franz Ziegler bis Eduard Bernstein: Die Vertreter der Stadt Breslau im Deutschen Reichstag 1871–1918,” in Johannes Bärmann, Alois Gerlach, and Ludwig Petry, *Geschichtliche Landeskunde*, vol. II (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1969), pp. 322–354.

⁶⁵ See “Ist Eduard Bernstein ein Sozialdemokrat?,” in Bernstein A, G75.

⁶⁶ For the importance of a candidate’s working-class background for the Reichstag elections, see Ignaz Auer’s speech at the 1903 Dresden Party Conference, cited in Bernstein, *Ignaz Auer*, pp. 66–67.

⁶⁷ For a brief summary of Bernstein’s parliamentary activities, see Paul Löbe, “Eduard Bernstein als Breslauer Abgeordneter,” in Hirsch, *Der “Fabier” Eduard Bernstein*, pp. 148–154.

⁶⁸ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Neuen Reichsteuern* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1906), and *Die Steuerpolitik der Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1914).

and imposing high tax brackets on top incomes, as well as on other sizeable revenues emerging from capital gains, property, and inheritance. In addition, the SPD sought to link taxes to public expenditures, rejecting exorbitant spending for the military, the growing expenses of the imperial courts, lavish diplomacy, and state subsidies for certain religious institutions. The party demanded spending increases for public education, cultural institutions like public museums and theaters, health services for low-income families, public transportation, and social welfare.⁶⁹

The revisionist theorist

In addition to his busy parliamentary schedule, Bernstein found time to inaugurate his own revisionist periodicals, the short-lived *Neues Montag-sblatt* (New Monday Paper) and the monthly *Dokumente des Sozialismus* (Documents of Socialism). In addition to promoting discussions of problems in socialist theory, both journals offered their readers rare historical documents pertaining to the socialist movement, and book reviews. Although the funds necessary for its continuation ran out in 1905, *Dokumente des Sozialismus* provided Bernstein with an independent base for expanding his historical and political studies from his evolution-ary socialist perspective.

However, the seemingly unending barrage of verbal attacks on the “evils of revisionism” continued. The assaults came mostly from Kautsky and more radical comrades like Mehring and Luxemburg, who controlled major Marxist party organs like *Vorwärts* and *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*. But Bernstein proved himself to be a worthy combatant. Following the strategy selected by his late mentor, Friedrich Engels, in *Anti-Dühring*, he combined the task of refuting his opponents’ arguments with the art of popularizing his own views. In so doing, Bernstein hoped to achieve at least three objectives: firstly, he would enlighten potentially sympathetic readers from both within and without the SPD on the true objectives of an ethically motivated, evolutionary socialism. Secondly, he hoped to clarify his significant differences with the allegedly “pro-Bernstein” position of liberal commentators, thus diffusing charges that he had become a willing mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie. Thirdly, he would continue to expose the party’s embarrassing theory–practice split, which, despite his opponents’ high-sounding arguments to the contrary, remained an obvious problem. Thereby, he would prove revisionists to be more in tune with Marx’s proposed “ruthless criticism” than the self-appointed guardians and apologists of Marxist orthodoxy themselves.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4, 46–47.

From time to time, Bernstein interrupted his exhausting verbal battles with his opponents to give sufficient attention to producing fine works of political history. There are but few socialist theorists of Bernstein's caliber who managed to combine the journalist's talent for creating a compelling narrative based on personal experience with a profound analysis of historical developments. Throughout his long career, Bernstein proved to be a genuine master of this art. Ten years after his well-reviewed *Cromwell and Communism*, he completed his detailed *History of the Berlin Labor Movement*, covering its formative period from 1870 to 1905. The three volumes of this study allow the reader a glimpse into the fascinating social context of the rising Berlin working-class movement. Rather than losing himself in details, Bernstein weaves the main historical threads into a colorful tapestry that reflects a nationalist enthusiasm at the outbreak of the 1870 Franco-Prussian War powerful enough to engulf large segments of the proletariat. The study also describes the social and economic isolation of German Jews and the many "ordinary" episodes of Prussian anti-Semitism, highlighting in particular the difficult electoral campaigns of Jewish social democrats. Moreover, it affords the reader an interesting look into the small villages of the principality of Brandenburg, where, as late as 1900, the Junkers still ruled in semi-absolutist fashion. Bernstein details their authoritarian practices, describing, for example, how they ordered the local police to falsify election results which would have given the working class a sizeable share of the vote, and then unleashed those same police to violently break up the ensuing public protests.

In another excellent essay written around this time, entitled "Parliamentarianism and Social Democracy", Bernstein returns to one of his favorite historical topics: the role of radical artisans' and workers' organizations in helping to develop European representative democracy from seventeenth-century England to early-twentieth-century Germany.⁷⁰ Bernstein's comparative analysis clearly benefits from his long years in British exile, insightfully pointing out the major obstacles to electoral reform and effective working-class participation in political affairs. Analyzing the strong influence of Jacobin-Blanquist revolutionary strategies on the formation of Marx's thought, he shows how such expressions of radical insurrectionism constrained the timely development of a socialist theory of reform. Bernstein's reflections on this unfortunate legacy of Jacobinism – at the time firmly ensconced in the anti-liberal sentiments of many labor leaders – are complemented by a detailed critical analysis of the main arguments used by revolutionary Marxists against parliamentarianism.

⁷⁰ Bernstein, *Parlamentarismus und Sozialdemokratie*.

The central theme of Bernstein's theoretical endeavors in the first decade of the new century, however, was his untiring call for the "official" adoption of a consciously reformist SPD ideology coupled with a more conciliatory attitude toward progressive segments of the bourgeoisie. This "principled reformism" was based on two main ideas. Firstly, Bernstein rejected revolution as an appropriate strategy because the modern state, intrinsically interconnected with a highly complex capitalist society, could not be destroyed without hampering the healthy "evolution" of all classes. Secondly, he insisted that the pace of social emancipation had to correspond with the actual socioeconomic development, and material as well as ethical needs, of the working class. In his view, the industrial proletariat had to be given time to grow, gradually lifting itself up to solidarity and self-determination, and thereby infusing capitalist structures with the socialist "principle of cooperation." Indeed, Bernstein's ethical theory of reform was deliberately designed to upset the rigidly dogmatic foundations of Marxist orthodoxy, while at the same time avoiding the equally dangerous atheoretical instrumentalism of the party *Praktiker*. In a number of crucial essays written between 1903 and 1910, Bernstein expanded on the main principles of his evolutionary socialism, focusing on concrete practical and strategic problems like the hotly disputed question of forming progressive coalitions with bourgeois parties in parliament.⁷¹

In his 1905 essay, "Class and Class Struggle," Bernstein returned to an investigation of the socioeconomic premisses for the formation of such a liberal-socialist alliance, while also offering important sociological clarifications of the concept of "class." As early as in the 1879 "Three Star Article," Bernstein had shown some reluctance in participating in the party's efforts to turn the industrial proletariat into a metaphysical icon. Moreover, there were similar ideas in his *The Preconditions of Socialism*, claiming that the working class frequently displayed stronger petty-bourgeois attitudes than their orthodox Marxist defenders would ever dare to admit.⁷² In many respects, Bernstein's views on class had the same pragmatic flavor expressed in the earthy statements of his lifelong friend and mentor, Ignaz Auer:

Obviously, from close up, the masses look very different from what a well-meaning romantic takes them to be. But how can it be otherwise after centuries of mistreatment under slave holders, feudal domination, and industrial exploitation? It is the declared purpose of our movement to improve this situation. But whoever

⁷¹ See Eduard Bernstein, *Der politische Massenstreik und die politische Lage der Sozialdemokratie in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1906); *Der Streik* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Löning, 1906); and "Politischer Massenstreik und Revolutionsromantik," in *SM* 10 (1906), pp. 12–20.

⁷² *PS*, p. 35.

sees this task naively as that of a noble prince who simply has to awaken the prodigal sleeping beauty called "the people," is gravely mistaken about the task ahead of us.⁷³

While Bernstein refused to abandon "class" as a critical analytic concept, his evolutionary "revision" of the Marxist theory of class struggle actually predates some important insights offered by Max Weber and Robert Michels a few years later. Reacting against Marx's narrow conceptual scheme, which reduced the sociological complexity of reality to comprehensive terms like "class struggle," Bernstein claimed that "class," as a sociological genus, needed more defining elements than purely economic categories like the "ownership of the means of production." Observing the rapid growth of the "middle class," he argued strongly in favor of including social characteristics like "status," "education," and "prestige" as well. Moreover, he felt that the increasing diversification of the class structure under modern conditions facilitated a "gradual lifting of the general cultural level," making class struggles of the future very different from those of the past. Formulated in a liberal language of rights and waged in formal political institutions like the legislature and the courts, "class struggles" themselves would "evolve," becoming less violent and more "civilized" in character.

At the same time, Bernstein was careful not to turn his evolutionary socialism into another deterministic *Weltanschauung* by emphasizing that there was no absolute guarantee for a steady progressive development, since unforeseen "social conditions might emerge that could throw us back into a time of barbarism and struggle."⁷⁴ Although he reaffirmed the basic character of the SPD as a "proletarian party," he also emphasized its potential to transform itself gradually into a more inclusive "people's party" with an inherent responsibility to welcome all those elements who acknowledged the social needs of the working class as the crucial red thread connecting the political demands of social democracy. For Bernstein, "class" therefore entailed an ideal component which served as an organizing principle for all members of society who subscribed to a socialist ethic. Whoever rejected the universalism expressed in the concrete demands of the working class should stay outside social democracy.⁷⁵ Following Bernstein's lead, contemporary political theorist Stephen Eric Bronner highlights the importance of such a "class ideal," a "revisionist" notion that is once again receiving new consideration in current socialist theory.⁷⁶

⁷³ Auer cited in Bernstein, *Ignaz Auer*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ Bernstein, *Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Sozialismus III*, pp. 50–51.

⁷⁵ Bernstein, "Hat der Liberalismus eine Zukunft in Deutschland," in *Bernstein A*, E112.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 161–168.

Though ultimately incapable of convincing the party leadership to endorse the formation of promising temporary coalitions on the state level, Bernstein's calls for a "consequent reformism" nonetheless began to take concrete shape in a series of constructive critiques of the theoretical portion of the 1891 Erfurt Program.⁷⁷ These efforts culminated in a well-attended 1909 Amsterdam lecture on the principles of revisionism whose published version includes a fairly detailed blueprint for a new, "reformist" party program. Entitled "Guiding Principles for the Theoretical Portion of a Social Democratic Party Program," the tract suggests, among other things, the removal of "unscientific passages" dogmatically predicting the doom of capitalist society.⁷⁸ Instead, Bernstein's own draft defined *any* party program as merely reflecting the movement's "socialist ill": i.e., the theoretical expression of the ethical principles and concrete demands of social democracy.⁷⁹ Arguing that "revisionism translated into the political realm means consequent reformism," Bernstein's proposals represent the blueprint of an evolutionary socialism that consciously confined the party's programmatic language to the task of linking socialist ideals with concrete political demands. However, in the decades ahead, Bernstein's "principled reformism" would fare just as badly as Engels' scientific-socialist *Weltanschauung*, which Bernstein had helped to demolish. Increasingly subordinating ethical principles to instrumentalist and nationalist concerns, German social democrats would begin to lose its interest in *any* theoretical blueprint at all.

⁷⁷ See chapter 7 for more on this topic.

⁷⁸ Eduard Bernstein, "Der Revisionismus in der Sozialdemokratie," in Heimann, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, pp. 91–136.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

The lessons of the Dresden Party Conference

The danger of new anti-socialist measures having subsided under the new chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, Bernstein's hopes for a genuine liberalization of German politics were considerably heightened. Mostly, he continued to rely on his revisionist assumption that, under the conditions of modern capitalism, the middle classes would grow in number and complexity. Such development would translate into greater social wealth and social security, which, in turn, would develop the civic consciousness of the middle class, making its members more open to socialist demands for redistribution of the social product and the abolition of class privilege. At the same time, steady economic growth would improve the conditions of the working class and lift their educational and social status. Scores of workers would soon join the expanding lower middle class to form a "new middle class" whose progressive political agenda would eventually result in the transformation of Prussian authoritarianism.

But Bernstein's evolutionary optimism, based on the belief that the rising "new middle class" would be more susceptible to social democratic ideals, was neither to be fulfilled in the context of the Wilhelmine Empire nor during the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic. Rather, the growing segments of white-collar workers, state and municipal officials, and salaried employees tended to be attracted by the nationalistic and anti-Semitic ideology of the national-liberals, the Catholic Centre Party, and, ultimately, Hitler's NSDAP. Lily Braun, a socialist party activist sympathetic to the revisionist cause, prophetically challenged Bernstein's evolutionism on this issue: "Where are the free-thinking bourgeois elements who might profitably be turned to good account in a common struggle for the implementation of democratic demands?"¹ Kautsky, too, continued to regard the chances for a successful formation of a class-transcending, democratic alliance in the German Empire as very slim.

¹ Lily Braun cited in Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, p. 133.

Yet, ever the social optimist, Bernstein refused to abandon his conviction that German political forces of democracy would eventually find common parliamentary strategies.

As he saw it, economic growth, the formation of genuinely left-liberal bourgeois parties, and the evolutionary logic of parliamentary democracy were intrinsically connected, pulling Germany towards liberal democracy. This overall *Gestalt* of his evolutionary socialism was also reflected in his historical studies. With little time to spare from his onerous task as a Reichstag representative, Bernstein used every spare hour to complete his cherished literary project on the history of the German labor movement, *From Sect to Party: German Social Democracy Past and Present*, the popular version of his more scholarly volume, *The Labor Movement*.² These studies represent impressive examples of Bernstein's remarkable talents as a social historian. Emphasizing the German labor movement's role in the struggle for political and social rights, Bernstein recounted the slow evolution of social democracy. Starting with the abstract ideology of small, sectarian labor utopias that relied upon emancipatory schemes designed to liberate "humanity" from "wage slavery," he quickly moved to a discussion of the concrete political objectives of a growing industrial working class, "not bound to rules passed down by tradition, but increasingly choosing its own social forms according to the ever-changing conditions of political and economic life."³

Praising the educational function of parliamentary activity for the "organic development of a proletarian civic consciousness," Bernstein indulged in a rather optimistic assessment of the "democratic process" in the German Empire, an evaluation that recurred two years later in his extensive historical volume detailing the experience of the German tailors' movement.⁴ Some passages in these studies suggest that he was more concerned with keeping alive his hopes for social progress via the parliamentary road, than with an accurate description of recalcitrant Prussian authoritarianism and the political rule of the Junkers. On the other hand, political and economic conditions *did* seem to improve in the first years of the new century. Foremost were the record-breaking results of the 1903 general elections, in which the SPD captured more than three million votes and eighty-one seats in the Reichstag. Bernstein read the elections as an encouraging sign that, even under the repressive conditions of a military state, the rudimentary liberalism manifest in Germany's political system could gradually be developed in British fashion.

² Bernstein, *Die Arbeiterbewegung*.

³ Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei*, p. 5.

⁴ Bernstein, *Die Arbeiterbewegung*, p. 169; and *Geschichte der deutschen Schneiderbewegung* (Berlin: Verband der Schneider, 1913).

Emerging as the second strongest party in the country, the SPD was entitled to place one of its own in the post of First Vice-President of the Reichstag, an office that would force the social democrats to abandon their traditional refusal to pay an official courtesy visit to the emperor. Bebel, anticipating a favorable proposal from his party's right-wing faction, made abundantly clear his strong opposition to even such "symbolic" gestures of socialist "integration" into the authoritarian German "system." Predictably, Bernstein not only disagreed, but once again emerged as spokesman for the revisionist dissenters. Insisting that attending a purely formal ceremony with no political consequences should not be interpreted as a "glorification of the monarchist principle," he went on to compare some aspects of the emperor's status with the office of a republican president.⁵ Although he was obviously referring to the symbolism of representation rather than the representative principle, Bernstein's arguments could be taken as a call to compromise the SPD's principled stand for democracy. The ensuing bitter debate over a possible socialist vice-presidency was another impressive example of Bernstein's ability to cause "trouble" within the party ranks. This time, however, the roles were reversed: Bebel refused to separate his principles from political expediency, while Bernstein, the fervent adherent to Kantian ethics, fell prey to the shallow instrumentalism of tactical compromise.

Even worse, Bernstein inadvertently emboldened brash *Praktiker* like Georg von Vollmar to use his revisionist arguments to further their own political careers. With an eye on the Bavarian state parliament, Vollmar proposed that the party also permit the immediate candidacy of social democrats for all leading offices in state Diets. Refusing to accept Bebel's guidelines, the feisty Bavarian also demanded an official SPD resolution in favor of claiming the office of Reichstag president in case of a future all-out electoral victory. Vollmar's incendiary style, and the considerable political skills he exhibited in orchestrating support for his position alerted Bebel to the seriousness of the new conflict. Realizing that revisionism could no longer be "contained" by focusing on Bernstein alone, he agreed with Kautsky on the need for a firmer response. It was clear that revisionisms – ranging from Bernstein's evolutionary socialism to Vollmar's atheoretical reformism – had burgeoned into a powerful threat to orthodox Marxist theory, and thereby to Bebel's and Kautsky's own leadership positions in the SPD hierarchy. For his part, Kautsky believed that only a swift and aggressive counterattack led by the charismatic Bebel himself would stop the further rise of "petty-bourgeois socialism." Deliberately employing Vollmar's challenge as an opportunity to set a

⁵ Eduard Bernstein, "Was folgt aus dem Ergebnis der Reichstagswahlen?," in *SM* 7 (1903), p. 479.

warning example for future revisionist incursions, Bebel rose to the occasion and demanded from his party the unambiguous condemnation of *all* forms of revisionism.

Confident that “the tables could be cleared once and for all,” he chose the upcoming 1903 Dresden Party Conference as the ideal forum in which to deal revisionists a decisive blow. Kautsky, having taken a verbal beating at the previous party conference from Heine and Bernstein for his “narrow dogmatism” and his “authoritarian leadership-style as editor of *Neue Zeit*,”⁶ claimed he was “sick and tired of continuing to fight revisionism for the next five years behind closed doors” and eagerly awaited Bebel’s “clear marching orders.”⁷ Ready to issue those orders, the party leader opened the Dresden proceedings with unusually blunt demands for greater ideological conformity. In order to illustrate his case, Bebel cited “disturbances” caused by various “opportunist” literary contributions of “revisionist authors” to bourgeois publications. Coming down hard on the “detached intellectualism” of those “abstract marauders” who had fallen on “the back of the party,” Bebel employed his battle-tested rhetoric of “proper class origins” in preparation for his attack on Vollmar’s “opportunism.”⁸

Despite a determined fight put up by Bernstein and other revisionist intellectuals who pleaded for “freedom of expression,” Bebel’s strategy evinced its desired effects.⁹ Most delegates agreed with their leader that “too much openness” could severely undermine party unity as well as hurt the SPD’s ability to expand its vital working-class base. Scenting total victory, the agile party leader quickly turned against Bernstein’s and Vollmar’s political demands for a possible SPD vice-presidency. To his surprise, however, Bebel ran into a series of determined defense speeches led by Vollmar, who minced no words in accusing him and Kautsky of using the “dictatorial language of fanaticism and authoritarianism,” and of “trampling on the sacred right of freedom of speech and criticism.”¹⁰ Several delegates verbally supported Vollmar, and the atmosphere in the conference hall turned suddenly hostile. For the first time since the 1875 Gotha Unification Conference, the party found itself on the brink of a politically disastrous split.

Counting on his personal reputation in the labor movement, Bebel

⁶ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, abgehalten zu München, abgehalten vom 14–20 September 1902* (Berlin, 1902), pp. 121–126.

⁷ Kautsky cited in *EB*, p. 92.

⁸ Bebel quoted in Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887–1912*, p. 165.

⁹ See, for example, Georg Bernhard, “Parteimoral,” in *Die Zukunft* (January 10, 1903), pp. 79–80.

¹⁰ Vollmar cited in *Protokoll 1903 Dresden Party Conference*, pp. 334–339.

responded with an emotional appeal for support while at the same time attacking Bernstein's "bourgeois" language of rights. Now it became clear why Bebel had opened his remarks with a consideration of "proper class origins." In their constant appeals for the "right to free expression," Bernstein and his revisionist comrades had opened themselves up to the orthodox Marxist charge that they had deserted "socialist" principles in favor of "bourgeois" liberalism.¹¹ In the end, Vollmar's speech was not enough to rally the party behind his proposals. Shamed into a *pro forma* affirmation of Bebel's class criteria, most delegates expressed their support of his leadership and resoundingly approved two separate resolutions: one condemning future contributions of SPD members to the bourgeois press without "proper reflection"; the other emphatically rejecting "the various revisionist strategies to alter our sound and victorious principle of class struggle."¹² On the surface, at least, it seemed that Bebel and Kautsky had decisively defeated their old nemesis. The delegates to the Dresden Conference declared the Revisionist Controversy ended; Bernstein's and Vollmar's "heresies" were pronounced dead. Orthodox Marxists had salvaged the old Erfurt dogma of increasing class antagonisms while reaffirming their oppositional politics of "splendid isolation" – the fundamental rejection of social democratic participation in any non-socialist government.¹³ With only eleven delegates objecting, it was easy for Kautsky to fill various party papers with triumphant articles about the "final demise" of revisionism.

Encouraged by the results of their "hardline tactics," Kautsky and Bebel were eager to narrow further the parameters of acceptable dissent, and thus continued their battle aimed at the systematic isolation of revisionists.¹⁴ For example, they supported the demotion of the prominent neo-Kantian ethical socialist, Kurt Eisner, who, along with some of his like-minded comrades, was removed from his influential position as editor of *Vorwärts* for purely ideological reasons.¹⁵ A few years later, Gerhard Hildebrand, a revisionist expert on international relations, suffered an even worse fate from Bebel's and Kautsky's internal "party purge."

Hildebrand had argued that the rapid internationalization of business and trade was preventing the socialization of the entire production

¹¹ See Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917*, p. 25.

¹² *Protokoll*, 1903 Dresden Party Conference, pp. 300–345.

¹³ Dieter Dowe and Kurt Klotzbach, eds. *Programmatische Dokumente der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1973), pp. 182–183.

¹⁴ See John L. Snell, *The Democratic Movement in Germany 1789–1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), p. 291.

¹⁵ See Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887–1912*, pp. 176–185.

process. Like Bernstein, Hildebrand foresaw the co-existence of "mixed forms of economy" for many years to come. Moreover, he publicly defended Germany's "right to colonies." Publishing the results of his statistical analysis in various revisionist party papers, he pointed to the rapid emergence of an intense international struggle over shrinking global economic resources.¹⁶ Championing the interests of the "German workers" at the expense of the party's "abstract internationalism," Hildebrand seemed to subscribe to a new version of Naumann's nationalist coalition between social democracy and the German bourgeoisie. Greeted with sharp rebukes from the orthodox party press and lacking Bernstein's prominent stature, Hildebrand was summarily expelled from the SPD, after being cited by the Executive Committee for his "flagrant violation of the party program's principles." Though strongly disapproving of Hildebrand's ethnonationalism and his vocal support of German *Weltpolitik*, Bernstein was unable to suppress his own "liberal" outrage at the breach of procedural justice and came to Hildebrand's defense. He chided the party for compromising the most basic demands for openness in scientific research, and for violating the "cherished principle" of a broad representation of diverse opinions in the SPD.¹⁷ Encouraged by Bernstein's statement of support, Hildebrand appealed his expulsion and earned the right to another hearing at the 1912 Chemnitz Party Conference.

In the meantime, however, after long discussions with his more orthodox comrades, Bernstein arrived at the conclusion that Hildebrand had indeed gone beyond the results of his own "scientific analysis" and was actually disavowing the very socialist ideals that constituted the partisan core of the international labor movement. True to his methodological dualism, which separated "scientific statements of fact" from "legitimate party directives to demand from its members the strict adherence to the ethical ideals of the movement," Bernstein reversed his opinion on the "Hildebrand Affair" and openly supported the expulsion verdict of the party court.

However, in these last few years of the Wilhelmine Empire, orthodox Marxists increasingly found their "ideological victories" being undermined by the growing need to tolerate the *Praktiker* so as to maintain party unity. As Stanley Pierson has noted, this dilemma ultimately pushed Marxist doctrine into theoretical exhaustion, giving it a purely "defensive" and "apologetic" function.¹⁸ As the labor movement grew, the

¹⁶ Gerhard Hildebrand, *Sozialistische Aussenpolitik* (Jena: Diederichs, 1911).

¹⁷ Eduard Bernstein, "Darf Hildebrand ausgeschlossen werden?," in *SM* 16 (1912), pp. 1,147-1,150.

¹⁸ Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany*, p. 227.

ideological purity of Kautsky's Marxism had to be sacrificed on the cold altar of political expediency. Social democracy began to speak in many different tongues, giving credence to Bebel's complaint that the ideological and tactical differences in the party had never been greater.¹⁹ The orthodox rhetoric at the Dresden Party Conference and the "Hildebrand Affair" notwithstanding, Bernstein's arguments were still alive and the "Revisionist Controversy" was far from over.

The mass-strike debate

Having established important contacts with the powerful British unions during his London years, Bernstein did not share some of his comrades' reflexive suspicion of trade unionists; throughout his career he publicly acknowledged their pragmatic *Kleinarbeit*, which, over time, had led to tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary workers. In addition, he cherished the trade unionists' organizational framework not only for its material contributions to the working class, but also for its ability to "teach democracy" to the proletariat. He was convinced that only their concrete participation in the political process would prepare workers for their future by providing them with the practical know-how of economic and political self-administration.

Though nominally independent, the German "free" trade unions had always coordinated their political activities with the SPD. Beginning in the early 1890s, the moderate ideological approach of union leaders, combined with their willingness to put short-term improvements for the industrial proletariat over long-term goals of transforming the system, had garnered significant economic concessions from employer organizations and the government – a policy which had resulted in dramatic increases in union membership. In the first decade of the new century, the unions moved even further toward accommodation with the "class enemy," and the powerful leadership in the "General Commission" began to design a course of ideological emancipation from the SPD in order to export its "politics of moderation" to the formulation of the political strategy and tactics of the entire German labor movement.²⁰

Despite his sympathies for their reformist strategy and his close connection to their leaders, particularly Adolf von Elm, the chairman of the Central Union of Consumers' Societies, Bernstein refused to surrender his socialist ethics to the burgeoning spirit of union instrumentalism.

¹⁹ *Protokoll*, 1903 Dresden Party Conference, p. 309.

²⁰ See Peter Strutynski, *Die Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Marxisten und Revisionisten in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung der Jahrhundertwende* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1976), pp. 254–255.

His close relationship to the trade unions was sorely tested during the heated 1905–06 debates in the German labor movement on the appropriateness of the political mass strike as a legitimate means of achieving democratic concessions from the government. These debates marked the beginning of new factional divisions within the SPD. Proposed by radical revolutionaries like Rosa Luxemburg as a gesture of solidarity for the Russian revolutionaries of 1905, the support or rejection of the “mass strike” emerged in Germany as the defining criterion separating “radical” Marxists from their “orthodox” Marxist comrades. Under Kautsky’s theoretical leadership, the latter had previously enlisted Luxemburg and her radical faction in their own struggle against both Bernstein’s revisionists and the *Praktiker*. On the question of the mass strike, however, Bebel and Kautsky found themselves unable to share common ground with the radicals on this issue. Ultimately, they staked out a “centrist-orthodox” position between Luxemburg’s radicalism and the moderate stance of the *Praktiker*.

It all started with momentous changes in Czarist Russia. Beginning in 1902, a wave of large-scale strikes had hit the industrial centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg, ultimately resulting in the revolutionary upheavals of 1905. On January 22, 1905 – “Bloody Sunday” – troops of Czar Nicholas II opened fire on peaceful marchers, thus setting off long months of social unrest and radical forms of public protest, including the creation of the powerful St. Petersburg workers’ council under the leadership of Leon Trotsky. Ultimately the riots were quelled by a combination of economic exhaustion, political repression, and the Czar’s false promise of allowing the drafting of a progressive constitution. Backed by his fierce Cossack troops and his largely loyal bureaucratic state machine, Nicholas II eventually proceeded to dissolve the only institutional sign of the 1905 revolution – the hastily created, limited Russian parliament (*Duma*).

News of the unfolding events in Russia struck the West like a thunderbolt, crucially influencing the revolutionary strategies of international socialism. Suddenly, worn out Marxist revolutionaries who had seemed to have lost their theoretical edge were given a new lease on life. It even appeared as though Rosa Luxemburg, Parvus, and Karl Liebknecht had been right all along in their radical assessments of modern social development. If even the most repressive regime in Europe could be fundamentally shaken by large-scale political strikes and economic boycotts, then these powerful “weapons of the proletariat” might be able to achieve even greater things in Germany where the proletariat was far better organized. Initially showing varying degrees of support for the Russian revolutionaries, Germany’s official socialist party papers

provided heavy coverage of the events in Russia.²¹ Various commentators speculated on the final outcome of the struggle, keeping their readership in suspense with weekly updates usually obtained second-hand from liberal Russian journalists. Soon the theoretical discussion on the means and ends of social revolution broadened into more practical debates on the political situation in eastern Europe in general, most notably the long-standing issue of Poland's possible independence from Russia, a bone of contention between the nationalist Polish Socialist Party and internationalist Russian Marxist groups.

A staunch internationalist of Polish extraction, Luxemburg immediately departed for Russia in order to experience first-hand the power and innovative possibilities of direct proletarian action. In particular, she was interested in observing the psychological mobilization potential of the mass strike—a potent weapon that Belgian and Dutch workers had already tried with mixed success. Luxemburg's letters of the time celebrate the mass strike as the “fundamental revolutionary form of the proletariat,” which, she felt, heightened the radical consciousness of the masses dramatically and could lead to astonishing experiments in workers' self-government and factory management.²² Witnessing daily manifestations of “self-contained proletarian sovereignty” strengthened her belief in the ability of the productive classes to conduct their own political and economic affairs without their capitalist “masters.” Always the acerbic critic, Luxemburg's observations of the Russian events were frequently spiced with ironic remarks directed at the SPD bureaucrats at home: “A quiet heroism and a feeling of solidarity are developing among the masses which I would very much like to show to my dear Germans.”²³ Yet, as the months wore on, Luxemburg herself was forced to eat her words of praise as she watched an increasingly divided Russian labor movement descend into a morass of bureaucratic authoritarianism and organizational chaos, characterized by a lack of genuine democratic leadership.

No wonder, then, that Luxemburg's “dear” German comrades grew increasingly disillusioned with the Russian model. The cautious voices of the trade-union leadership began to find a wider audience, emphasizing that specifically economic issues like acceptable wage contracts and working hours were far more important for the advancement of the working class than the radical utopias being undertaken in industrially backward countries. Carl Legien, the charismatic Secretary-General of

²¹ See Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854–1938*, pp. 132–151.

²² Stephen Eric Bronner, ed. *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, 2nd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), p. 47.

²³ Luxemburg cited in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary for Our Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), p. 56.

the General Commission, announced as the “official” position of the German free trade unions the support of “all appropriate political means” contributing to “a peaceful evolution of society to a higher stage.”²⁴ Most union leaders eagerly followed him in his categorical rejection of mass-strike tactics for Germany, calling it a sure-fire way to the political annihilation of the entire labor movement.

Recognizing the strong influence on workers exerted by the trade unions, the SPD party leadership struggled to play it both ways. Ultimately, however, it dawned on them that they simply could not afford to alienate Legien and his organizational network. Even orthodox Marxists like SPD co-chairman, Paul Singer, counselled against the potential use of the mass strike for political ends, thus driving Luxemburg’s and Liebknecht’s radical faction into even greater isolation.²⁵ For the radicals, the mass strike was a perfect means by which to mobilize the masses; in their opinion, it was the only realistic way to facilitate a genuine democratization of the German state and thereby combat their country’s militarism and imperialism. Repeatedly, radicals rejected Bebel’s and Kautsky’s “compromise” – a centrist position which endorsed the use of the mass strike only “under certain preconditions.” Knowing very well that Bebel had agreed to Legien’s request that such “preconditions” were to be determined only with the full consent of the union leadership, Luxemburg mockingly pointed out that “Marxists” were colluding with unprincipled *Praktiker* whose aim was to make the actualization of the mass strike impossible. But the trade-union leadership struck back, calling the radicals “socialist literati” who, foolishly risking the “healthy” expansion of the labor movement for their own “loony abstractions,” had once again proven that they had “not the slightest idea about the practical imperatives of the flesh-and-blood proletariat.”²⁶

At the 1905 and 1906 party conferences in Jena and Mannheim, most delegates went along with Legien’s arguments, choosing the “safe” route of settling the dispute over the mass strike by voting overwhelmingly in favor of a strategy based on Kautsky’s compromise position, which had been secretly worked out in advance by Legien and Bebel. This decision solidified the glaring rift between the orthodox Marxist party leadership and the radicals, while driving the former into the hands of the party *Praktiker* and making the SPD even more dependent on the goodwill of the trade unions. As Gary Steenson has noted, the secrecy surrounding the SPD–trade union negotiations, as well as the content of the anti-mass-

²⁴ Carl Legien in *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des dritten Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Frankfurt/Main vom 8–13 Mai 1899* (Hamburg, 1899), p. 103.

²⁵ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854–1938*, p. 140.

²⁶ See Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany*, pp. 278–279; and EB, p. 118.

strike agreement itself, clearly signaled the party's growing impulse toward conservatism, bureaucratization, and hostility to theory.²⁷

While Bernstein, too, supported the SPD leadership in rejecting the use of the mass strike under current conditions in Germany, he nonetheless proved to be more radical on this issue than his orthodox comrades Kautsky and Bebel. One would have expected that the "evolutionary" language of the unions had appealed to him; yet his position didn't fit into any particular socialist camp but reflected his own tendency to preserve the best parts of the various models in question. Bernstein endorsed a "defensive" variant of the mass strike which he felt had to be used "strategically" by the labor movement to press the government for basic political rights like the abolition of Prussia's class-based electoral system. Directly referring to Engels' arguments made in his 1895 "Introduction" to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, Bernstein suggested that where there remained persistent undemocratic structures of domination, resistant to any rational discourse and negotiation, "a political strike can achieve what once had to be achieved by a fight behind the barricades."²⁸ Drawing on an evolutionary model that was married to the goal of political emancipation, Bernstein hoped that the threat of a general mass strike, combined with its short-term tactical use in limited scenarios might serve as a powerful catalyst for political change in Germany. Moreover, it might be possible to persuade left-liberal parties and their constituents to join such strikes as long as it was clear that they were directed at specific liberal goals such as the reform of the Prussian franchise. Although the struggle for electoral reform emerged as one of social democracy's defining political themes in the first years of the twentieth century, most of Bernstein's comrades did not share his call for stepping up the pressure via the mass-strike route.

The fact that Bernstein even contemplated the strategical use of the mass strike under *any* circumstances drew heavy fire from the party's entire *Praktiker* segment, including those revisionists who agreed with Legien's more "realistic" approach of tactical moderation in the face of existing power relations in the Empire. As Wolfgang Heine put it, social democrats had no other alternative but to keep their protests within "legal" bounds, since a well-maintained German army stood ready to drown workers in a sea of bullets. Moreover, Heine correctly emphasized that the government was probably hoping for the outbreak of a mass strike, and would be thankful to the radical leaders of the proletariat for giving it an excuse finally to crush the labor movement altogether.²⁹

²⁷ Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854–1938*, p. 149.

²⁸ Eduard Bernstein, "Der Streik als politisches Kampfmittel" in *SM* 10 (1906), p. 694.

²⁹ Heine cited in *EB*, pp. 117–118.

Bernstein responded to Heine's arguments by pointing out that a new wave of mass demonstrations would not necessarily lead the government to respond in violent fashion, for the ruling classes, too, had a stake in maintaining the social peace: "Under certain circumstances we may just decide to call their bluff; even the Prussians don't fire straight from the hip!"³⁰

Unwilling to deviate from his endorsement of the mass strike for democratic reform as a "fundamental socialist principle," Bernstein showed strong conviction. Indeed, on this issue he sounded more like Liebknecht than Kautsky. Though he questioned the compatibility of the 1905 Russian conditions with those then existing in Germany, and also objected to Luxemburg's calls for an "offensive" use of the mass strike, he nonetheless endorsed the radical faction's demands for greater "revolutionary flexibility of the party" on the electoral question. For Bernstein, social democracy could only renounce extra-legal activities like the mass strike once all political privileges were eliminated.³¹ As a last resort against political oppression, and used responsibly within the general framework of a peaceful evolution of society, the political mass strike was therefore "a suitable and legitimate means."³² To that end, he explicitly equated the struggle for electoral reform with the necessary "emancipation of labor from exploitation."³³

Genuine parliamentarianism, resting on universal, equal suffrage, represents in modern industrial society the most effective tool for implementing profound, piecemeal reforms without bloodshed . . . Universal, equal suffrage and parliamentary action must be seen as the apex, the most comprehensive form of class struggle – a permanent organic revolution . . . reflecting a level of cultural development that corresponds to modern civilization. That is why the political strike, devoted to securing electoral rights, must be seen as a special instrument.³⁴

Delivering fiery stump speeches before his Breslau constituency, Bernstein received standing ovations for defending the "dignity of the worker," politically manifested in fair electoral laws which "ought to be protected, if necessary, with our very lives."³⁵ Moreover, Bernstein felt that the enormous sacrifices connected with such a painful struggle would contribute to the education of the proletariat toward assuming moral and

³⁰ Bernstein cited in *ibid.*, p. 115.

³¹ Bernstein, *Die heutige Sozialdemokratie in Theorie und Praxis*, p. 48.

³² Eduard Bernstein, *Der politische Massenstreik und die politische Lage der Sozialdemokratie in Deutschland* (Breslau: Dietz, 1905), p. 17.

³³ Eduard Bernstein, "Politischer Massenstreik und Revolutionsromantik," in *SM* 10 (1906), p. 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Eduard Bernstein cited in Horst Heimann, ed. *Texte zum Revisionismus* (Bonn-Bad Godesberg: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1977), p. 162.

political leadership positions in a more democratic Germany of the future. Unlike Luxemburg, however, he wanted to make sure that the argument for the mass strike would not hinge on what he considered “abstract concepts” like her “spontaneity of the masses.” Reflecting a synthesis of rational planning and moral enthusiasm, the use of the mass strike represented a “last resort.” In order to circulate his ideas in the party, Bernstein drafted his “Twelve Principles of the Political Mass Strike,” affirming his conviction that political demonstrations of such magnitude had to be subject to both moral conscience and meticulous organization.³⁶

Seen from a philosophical perspective, his qualified support for the mass strike was anchored in the method of militant civil disobedience on the basis of a “moral appeal to the consciences of all members of society.” Yet such appeals had to be backed up by various forms of direct action, used as “an economic weapon for ethical purposes.”³⁷ Despite heavy criticism from orthodox Marxists who ridiculed his “strange politics of conscience,” Bernstein felt unapologetic about situating his endorsement of the mass strike within his general ethical framework. Designed to “awaken the proletariat’s dormant sense of justice,” the transformative and educational potential of this measure was just as important as its political objectives.³⁸ Bernstein never meant to reduce the struggle for electoral reform to a mere government petition. Rather, he emphasized that existing laws would have to be broken in “this electoral struggle of paramount meaning for the working class.”³⁹ As the debate dragged on, Bernstein integrated his theoretical position with a historical study of the development and function of labor strikes.⁴⁰ Overall, his perspective was consistent with his characteristic approach of wedding his libertarian-socialist principles to pragmatic reformist objectives. Predictably, it drew critiques from all factions: it failed to satisfy the revolutionary fervor of the radical Marxists; it refused to go along with Kautsky’s and Bebel’s objectivist language of scientific socialism; and it struck cautious union leaders and SPD *Praktiker* as altogether too dangerous and moralistic.

The hostile reception of Bernstein’s views on the mass strike in the labor movement was complemented by even stronger objections from the liberal camp. Here Bernstein was forced to learn a bitter lesson on seeing that the left-liberals were not prepared to use radical means in the struggle against Prussia’s discriminatory franchise laws. With no concrete liberal support on this issue forthcoming, the existing political order would

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁷ Bernstein, “Politischer Massenstreik und Revolutionsromantik,” p. 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Bernstein, *Der Streik*.

remain almost immune to socialist demands for profound social and economic reforms. Once again, Bernstein encountered the indispensable precondition for the achievement of democracy in Germany: evolutionary socialism, though appealing in its ethical principles, was hardly translatable into the harsh political context of the late Wilhelmine Empire without the creation of a democratic, class-transcending alliance.

If the Kaiser could publicly boast that he had the power to dissolve the Reichstag at will and have recalcitrant “red” members of parliament shot on the spot, what else might he be capable of under “Russian” conditions in Germany provoked by mass strikes? Unlike in England, a truly democratic “center” of republican, non-socialist forces never materialized in Wilhelmine Germany – not even on the pressing issue of electoral reform. Even other disadvantaged groups like the agrarian classes despised the industrial proletariat for its “loose city morality,” choosing instead to remain firmly embedded within an authoritarian social structure organized around “Church, Kaiser, and the German State.”

The threat of nationalism

As the mass-strike debate slowly died down, Bernstein’s intellectual energy was increasingly taken up with another problem that had emerged in the wake of the first “Moroccan Crisis” of 1905: the rise of nationalism. The creation of narrow chauvinistic criteria of who deserved to be called a “German” by the powers-to-be was nothing new. Almost every day, various government officials reminded social democrats that they would never drop the old conservative charge that socialists were “lawless, unpatriotic, fanatic, and uncultured.”⁴¹ Late in 1906, however, the “nationalist question” made its appearance on the stage of German politics with unprecedented force.

Seeking the authorization of additional military credits for its low-grade colonial wars in Southwest Africa, the German government suddenly found itself confronted with an unfamiliar problem: a majority of the Reichstag delegates refused to approve the funds. Chancellor von Bülow, himself a former foreign secretary and celebrated expert in colonial affairs, was forced to dissolve the parliament over this issue. Charging the majority with “forsaking the fatherland in its hour of danger,” he called for new elections in January 1907, hoping to use the next couple of weeks to negotiate the terms of a new coalition that would approve the necessary funds. The dissolution of the parliament could not have come at a worse

⁴¹ Chancellor Bülow cited in Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany*, p. 121.

time, for the government was still under the shock of the Moroccan Crisis: just a few months before, ignoring the protests of France and its allies and intent on further expanding Germany's political and economic sphere of influence, Kaiser Wilhelm had interrupted his Mediterranean spring vacation in Tangier to pledge publicly his support for maintaining the independence of Morocco against the French. The French government quickly activated its allies and called for an international diplomatic conference in the Spanish port city of Algeciras to settle the dispute. Predictably, Germany failed to win support for its position from other major European powers like Russia, Britain, and Italy. Chancellor von Bülow was eventually forced to accept an unfavorable settlement upholding France's previous status as the hegemonic power in a nominally "independent" Morocco.

Seeking to cover up its dual embarrassment in the area of foreign affairs and intent on swaying public opinion at home in its favor, the German Imperial Government unleashed an unprecedented propaganda campaign which was "officially" directed against the "foreign enemies of the Fatherland." Stressing the importance of the upcoming elections for Germany's international reputation, the government's campaign relied on the simplistic, but highly effective myth of an "encirclement strategy" devised by its European rivals in order to deny Germany its rightful place among the great colonial powers. Repeating its preposterous claims that Germany's "national honor" had been tainted by "French provocations," the government succeeded in stirring up nationalist passions that cut across existing social cleavages. Calling on his subjects to vote, first and foremost, as "Germans" in this "national election," the Kaiser himself complemented the vilification of Germany's "external enemies" with the demonization of domestic political opponents by stepping up his anti-Catholic and anti-socialist propaganda. While the SPD had always served the regime as a convenient example of "pernicious internationalism," Matthias Erzberger's Catholic Center Party had drawn the emperor's wrath by exposing administrative abuses in the colonies, thus carrying the major responsibility for the parliamentary refusal of the war credits.⁴²

Eager to ride the Protestant-Prussian jingoistic wave for their own electoral advantage, national-liberals quickly promised the chancellor to join the Conservative Party in a future governing coalition. Without the Center Party, however, von Bülow needed additional support, which he managed to garner from the left-liberals. Though traditionally critical of colonialism, the latter were ultimately persuaded to join the new "Bülow

⁴² Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 49.

Bloc," drawn by the chancellor's seemingly genuine intentions to grant major liberal concessions within the next two years. Of course, von Bülow never fulfilled these promises; his meaningless 1908 "proposals for reform" included neither the reform of the Prussian suffrage law, nor the promised liberalization of the repressive German Association Act. The instrumentalism of the left-liberals had been met by an even greater instrumentalism on the part of the government. Although the "Bülow Bloc" lasted less than two years, and von Bülow himself resigned in 1909, permanent damage was done to German liberalism. The tensions and ideological divisions within the left-liberal camp had grown in proportion to their political disappointment, a process leading to the resignation of left-liberal leaders Barth, Paul Nathan, and Rudolf Breitscheid from the *Freisinnige Vereinigung*, and the further fragmentation of the liberal movement. Most importantly, however, orthodox Marxists had finally obtained the necessary "proof" of Bernstein's political naiveté: it was now plain for everyone to see that the left-liberals had "sold out" to the government, abandoning their professed democratic principles of building a progressive alliance. Even rather moderate members of the SPD's Executive Committee, like Hermann Molkenbuhr, made the case that the creation of a socialist-liberal alliance was an impossible "pipe dream," because social democracy remained as the only genuinely democratic, non-nationalist party in Germany.⁴³

But the disastrous election results of 1907 put Molkenbuhr's claim in dispute. Losing nearly half of their parliamentary seats, orthodox Marxists were dismayed to learn that the government's chauvinistic appeals had even resonated with sizeable segments of the working class, appealing to them more strongly than Bebel's orthodox pleas for "a common identity of the international proletariat." Kautsky's warning that "The German proletariat [should be] at one with the French proletariat and not . . . with the German firebrands and Junkers" had not been heeded, thus dealing a severe blow to the party's internationalist self-understanding.⁴⁴ Recognizing the growing importance of the "national question," a number of vocal SPD *Praktiker* demanded from their party leadership the immediate reversal of its traditional internationalist stance. Claiming to rescue the party from its "misguided internationalist path," Joseph Bloch, editor of *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, emerged as one of the major revisionist champions of the nationalist cause.⁴⁵ He openly defended the wisdom of a "nationalist course," predicting that, in the long run, it would prove to be

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴⁵ Bloch cited in Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, p. 215.

much more in tune with the widespread “patriotic sentiments” of the German working class.⁴⁶

No doubt, the 1907 election marked a turning point in the history of the SPD as calls for a change of the party’s “internationalist Marxist character” and the defense of “German civilization” seemed to draw a larger audience. Influential party members began to doubt Bebel’s political instincts, forcing the old party leader to rethink his internationalism and align himself more closely with the “nationalist revisionists.” For example, when SPD Reichstag member, Gustav Noske, gave his famous parliamentary speech assuring the country that social democrats, too, recognized the duty of national defense and would resist with the rest if Germany should be “pressed to the wall,” even Bebel rushed to the podium to congratulate the speaker.⁴⁷

Stimulated by the success of radical nationalists like Alfred Hugenberg and General Keim in organizing the “new middle classes” into politically powerful “nationalist associations” (*nationale Verbände*), nationalist revisionists demanded similar initiatives from their own party leadership. Soon these demands mushroomed into a general denunciation of existing party tactics and their underlying theoretical framework. Severe criticisms pointing to the paucity of psychological insights in Marxism – especially with regard to the actual features of the modern “proletarian consciousness” – emerged almost overnight.⁴⁸ The failed modernization of Marxist theory had come back to haunt the party, only this time, nationalism was dictating the direction of change. The 1907 elections had pulled the plug; suddenly even minor organizational details like the choice of sites for upcoming party congresses were fair game for criticism. Most critics dealt with the political ramifications of the national question; others used cultural concepts like “national identity” to turn against the educational philosophy of party-led workers’ schools whose curriculum, in Bernstein’s words, still reflected the previous century’s “monstrosities of Marxist scholasticism.”⁴⁹ Still others lamented the failure of orthodox Marxism to deal with the “spiritual dimension” of the workers’ struggle, not hesitating to combine Marx and Nietzsche in the peculiar image of a this-worldly “proletarian superman” who would facilitate a “transvaluation of all values” according to superior norms.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Joseph Bloch, untitled, *SM* 11 (1907), pp. 247–249.

⁴⁷ Noske and Heine cited in Snell, *The Democratic Movement in Germany*, p. 297.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Ludwig Quessel, “Zur Psychologie des modernen Proletariat,” *SM* 13 (1909), pp. 811–820.

⁴⁹ Eduard Bernstein, “Die Theorie in der Partei,” in *SM* 13 (1909), pp. 1,531–1,537.

⁵⁰ See Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 164–181; and Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, p. 211.

The latter tendency found its most prominent personification in the influential Austrian socialist party journalist Karl Leuthner. A gifted orator and fervent apostle of anti-liberal "national socialism," Leuthner saw the unqualified support of German *Realpolitik* as the essence of all true socialist politics.⁵¹ Modifying the doctrine of "the will to power" of the "divine Nietzsche" to fit his own nationalist brand of socialist revisionism, Leuthner sharply condemned the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment for its "obvious lack of realism and political effectiveness."⁵² Both through the efforts of revisionists like Leuthner and the government's continued nationalist propaganda in the wake of the "Second Moroccan Crisis" in 1911, right-wing forces gathered momentum in the German labor movement. So deeply did these nationalist seeds take root, that there was a great clamor within the party to openly back the expansionist drive of the government for new colonies and further accelerate its dangerous naval build-up program. Seeking to strengthen their power base within the labor movement, nationalist revisionists worked closely with influential union functionaries in formulating concrete proposals for altering the SPD's "outdated" internationalist and "anti-patriotic" image. Playing with vaguely defined concepts such as "cultural community" and "healthy patriotism," nationalist revisionists sought to combine immediate electoral objectives with a new ideological vision of *Weltpolitik* which would resonate more closely with the propaganda of the government and the supposedly "national interests" of the German electorate.

Despite these early warning signs, the shrinking number of orthodox Marxists and revolutionary radicals refused to believe that the prevailing xenophobic mood was actually blossoming in the "internationalist" soil that had so nurtured the German proletariat. In the face of it all, radical Marxists like Liebknecht and Klara Zetkin continued to stand firm in their cosmopolitan principles, arguing that the party should ignore the reversal at the polls and continue to emphasize its international character.⁵³ Their comments increasingly drew the ire of nationalist revisionists like Gustav Noske, Max Schippel and Richard Calwer. But the combination of Marxist orthodoxy and radicalism was still influential enough to muster a swift response; behind the scenes, Kautsky managed to build a coalition against Calwer, who was soon dropped as a possible SPD candidate for the Reichstag and was ultimately pressured to resign from the party.

Kautsky interpreted the poor election results of 1907 as yet another confirmation of Marx's polarization thesis; a development that clearly indicated the sharpening contradictions in modern capitalism, soon to

⁵¹ Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, p. 82.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵³ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 72.

culminate in a general collapse of the system.⁵⁴ From where he sat, such “temporary setbacks” were actually a sign that Bebel’s strategy of revolutionary *attentisme* was corresponding to “objective” social developments. But to an increasing number of his comrades, it was clear that Kautsky’s internationalist-Marxist position had seen its day. At the various post-1907 party conferences, nationalist revisionists staged impassioned hymns to the “virtues of fatherland,” receiving louder applause from the delegates than Karl Liebknecht’s plea to renew the party’s efforts toward providing the working class with a “proper education in the tradition of proletarian internationalism.” It would take years for Kautsky to admit that his cherished theoretical mission of imparting “correct Marxist principles” to the party had been severely jeopardized by nationalist-revisionist forces and that the SPD was actually “going backwards.”⁵⁵

Another German socialist who did not receive high grades in acknowledging the ominous signs of the time was Eduard Bernstein. This was due, in part, to his dedication to the cause of facilitating a liberal-socialist *rapprochement* – even after the “liberal betrayal” of 1907. Unlike Kautsky, Bernstein downplayed the instrumentalism of the left-liberals, arguing that since the German working class was not yet strong enough on its own to create a democratic society, new coalition attempts with liberal forces would be inevitable.⁵⁶ For Bernstein, it was of greatest importance for the extension of democratic rights that social democracy overcome its partially self-imposed political isolation and develop a climate of mutual trust with the “advanced segments of the German bourgeoisie” – in spite of temporary setbacks. Maintaining close contact with Theodor Barth, Bernstein clung to the hope that the latter’s creation of the new Democratic Union Party in 1908 might still keep alive the dream of a German progressive alliance similar to the one existing in England.⁵⁷ Indeed, in the same year, Barth notified Bernstein of his resumed efforts for cooperation with the SPD, in particular the institution of a joint left-liberal-social democratic suffrage committee on the basis of the SPD program.⁵⁸

His ultimate goal within his grasp, an overjoyed Bernstein succeeded in persuading his party leader to discuss the conditions of such a cooperation agreement personally with Barth. But Bebel’s long-standing anti-bour-

⁵⁴ Karl Kautsky, “Der 25. Januar,” in *NZ* 25 (1906/07), pp. 589–592.

⁵⁵ Kautsky cited in Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912*, p. 234.

⁵⁶ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, “Randbemerkungen,” pp. 879–884. See also *SM* 12 (1908), pp. 782–783, 934.

⁵⁸ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 57.

geois sentiments and hardened political suspicion of anything even remotely “liberal” prevented a *rapprochement*. Fearing a politically explosive “mixing of water and fire,” and even risking a open split with a small number of dissenting revisionists, Bebel stood firmly opposed to a formal cooperation agreement with the liberals. Although other SPD leaders, like Paul Singer and Franz Mehring, considered Barth’s faction “the most intelligent group of the German bourgeoisie,” they, too, concurred with Bebel’s assessment, insisting that the party distance itself from Barth, whose “political propaganda actually aims at destroying the solid pillars of the class-conscious proletariat.”⁵⁹ Bernstein’s fading hopes that the party’s highest decision-making body – the Executive Committee – would nonetheless authorize a formal cooperation agreement with Barth disintegrated before his eyes when the SPD organ issued a negative judgment that reflected Bebel’s arguments.

But on the other side of the ideological fence, Barth was just as unsuccessful in rounding up support for his proposal among his liberal friends. Many left-liberals had not forgotten that social democratic electoral campaigns were frequently accompanied by harsh socialist screeds caricaturing their candidates, thus offending even those young left-liberals who had genuinely sought a political connection to the labor movement.⁶⁰ Pointing fingers at each other, both sides called Barth’s and Bernstein’s initiative a “meaningless gesture” from an “unreliable partner.”⁶¹ In the end, Barth was forced to cancel a joint liberal-socialist protest meeting in Bernstein’s district of Breslau for fear of violent clashes involving members of both camps – a clear sign that the liberal rank and file was not yet ready to associate with the “reds.”⁶² In an interview published in the Hungarian paper *Pester Lloyd*, Bernstein vented his disappointment, complaining about the “remarkably undemocratic character” of *certain elements* in German liberalism which had continuously frustrated the indispensable formation of a democratic liberal-socialist alliance.⁶³

Both Barth and Bernstein had failed to penetrate their respective party’s rigid structures of self-definition. Relying solely on its own strength, the labor movement clearly lacked the means and the popular support for a large-scale showdown with Prussian authoritarianism. Bernstein’s dream

⁵⁹ Mehring cited in Konstanze Wegner, *Theodor Barth und die Freisinnige Vereinigung: Studien zur Geschichte des Linksliberalismus im wilhelminischen Deutschland, 1893–1910* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968), pp. 125–126.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 121–126.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁶² Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, p. 58.

⁶³ Bernstein cited in “Eine Unterredung mit Eduard Bernstein,” in *Pester Lloyd* (1907), *Bernstein A* G473.

of a liberal-socialist alliance with the declared goal of democratizing German politics was not only frustrated by the increasing nationalist mood in the country, but also by the ideological rigidity of the SPD. The bitter lesson that his Aristotelian "principle of the middle way"⁶⁴ hardly translated into the harsh realities of Germany's divided society, was reinforced only months after his failed initiative with Barth.

In 1908, SPD state parliamentarians of the southern state of Baden voted in favor of a state budget that included wage and salary raises. Pointing out that standing party rules clearly prohibited such a "legitimation" of the existing political regime and calling for greater "party discipline," Bebel initiated an official SPD resolution of censure against the Baden representatives. Revisionists of all shades used this dispute to point to the contradiction between "our long-standing parliamentary practice and divorced [Marxist] theory."⁶⁵ Although Bebel succeeded in getting his resolution of censure passed at the 1908 Party Conference, 119 delegates who had voted against the resolution passed a separate statement in which they refused to acknowledge the binding character of Bebel's document. The party clearly stood divided. Bernstein bemoaned the SPD's missed opportunity of endorsing the Baden initiative as a practice of "responsible cooperation," accusing Bebel and other "Marxist scholastics" of "turning party discipline into the censorship of idols."⁶⁶

Indeed, a strong argument can be made that, by rejecting Bernstein's political vision of a liberal socialism, German social democracy missed a unique historical opportunity to lay the foundation for a far less conflictual relationship with the bourgeois camp after 1918. Had there been an established practice of more extensive cooperation between social democracy and the forces of liberalism, perhaps the crucial first SPD coalition with the left-liberals in 1919 would not have failed after only a few months, thus creating a very different foundation for the ill-fated Weimar Republic.

The missed opportunities of 1908 show that the SPD's orthodox Marxist leadership of the years 1900-14 bears some responsibility for failing to solve the "German Question" – the country's persistent inability to provide a home for democracy in its liberal sense. This is not to second-guess the possible success or failure of a liberal-socialist bloc. Even if it had come to the formation of an SPD alliance with Barth's small left-liberal party on the question of electoral reform, it is highly questionable whether such a coalition would have held up long enough to wrest

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated and introduced by T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 330.

⁶⁵ Eduard David cited in *EB*, p. 106.

⁶⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "Parteidisziplin," in *SM* 14(1910), p. 1,221.

actual political concessions from the entrenched source of real power. Both Bernstein's and Barth's ethical theory of mobilization politics ran into the iron wall of Prussian power politics, their liberal-democratic ideals clashing with the necessary systemic imperatives of political parties that were too small to enforce social change against the authoritarian elite, and too large to risk political annihilation.

"Noble patriotism"

Bernstein rejected any strategy which would elevate German nationalism and make it attractive to a working class searching to fill the ideological void left behind by an increasingly ossified Marxism.⁶⁷ Still, it was clear that in the decades following Engels' death, Bernstein had moved away from the orthodox Marxist internationalism he had espoused in his early articles in *Der Sozialdemokrat*. For example, he criticized Marx for his lacking understanding of the powerful influence of nationalism on all social classes, including the proletariat.⁶⁸ Seeking to address better this powerful phenomenon, Bernstein included in his own theory of nationalism psychological and ideological elements like "ethnic resentment" and the desire for the "satisfaction of an ethnic sense of superiority" in addition to economic factors.⁶⁹ Most of all, he objected to Bebel's and Kautsky's defeatist strategy of dealing with the national question by invoking a "meaningless" Marxist utopia in an "internationalist socialist future" which would make the issue of nationalism irrelevant.⁷⁰ In a series of essays, Bernstein outlined his views on nationalism in his characteristic "moderate" fashion: "It is necessary to avoid both the Scylla of ethnonationalism and the Charybdis of an amorphous internationalism."⁷¹

He began his arguments by reminding his comrades that the formation of the post-eighteenth-century modern nation state depended on its citizens' "natural feelings of love for their own country and their people."⁷² Yet, unlike the pure sentiments of primordial solidarity observed in tribal societies during earlier cultural stages, modern national-

⁶⁷ Eduard Bernstein, "Die Massen werden irre," in *SM* 13 (1909), pp. 1,012–1,018.

⁶⁸ Eduard Bernstein, "Einige Klippen der Internationalität," in *SM* 5 (1901), p. 255.

⁶⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "Handelspolitik und Völkerbeziehung," in *Sozialdemokratische Völkerpolitik*, pp. 167–178.

⁷⁰ Eduard Bernstein, "Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und die türkischen Wirren," in *NZ* 15.1 (1896/97), p. 110.

⁷¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Geburtenrückgang, Nationalität, und Kultur," *SM* 17 (1913), p. 1,497. For an excellent discussion of Bernstein's nationalist perspective, see Hans Mommsen, "Nationalismus und die nationale Frage im Denken Eduard Bernsteins," in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, pp. 131–148.

⁷² Eduard Bernstein, "Patriotismus und Klassenkampf," in *Sozialistische Völkerpolitik*, p. 134.

ism also harbored a progressive element manifested in the sociological function of modern “organically developed social organisms” to defend their integrity, independence, and cultural distinctiveness without impeding each others’ drive toward higher forms of social complexity.⁷³ In other words, Bernstein identified an “evolutionary,” sociological function of nationalism, which he called “noble patriotism,” as opposed to “anachronistic,” pre-modern forms of solidarity. The former was anchored in his general acceptance of the nation state as the most appropriate form of modern social organization and in optimistic assumptions regarding the steady growth of economic and political interdependence through international commerce, the rising importance of international law, and the expected evolution of democratic socialism.

As expressions of the “spirit of the modern age,” these modern developments were bound to strengthen the citizens’ “noble patriotic sentiments” as well as their cosmopolitan feelings of respect for, and cooperation with other nations.⁷⁴ “Noble patriotism” was the highest expression of the “civic impulse” that would ultimately connect all groups of society under the leadership of the working class. This definition resembles “Constitutional Patriotism,” a concept coined by the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas: only in this sense did Bernstein expect socialism to be “nationalist.”⁷⁵

But in order to fulfill their civic duty to defend their nation state against natural and social threats, citizens were entitled to full political liberty. Most importantly, genuine forms of popular sovereignty had to be introduced through universal and equal suffrage. As long as the German government prevented the extension of the democratic principle to *all* social classes, it pandered to the power interests of the Junkers in the name of the “fatherland,” while stifling social democratic efforts to establish an international community of civilized peoples.⁷⁶ As soon as the logic of representative democracy was reflected in political institutions, the proletariat gradually began to acquire legitimate “national interests” in the form of “national rights and duties.” Far from merely “tolerating” nationalism, Bernstein saw it as the duty of the party to strengthen such nationalist principles like “the maintenance of the nation’s effective self-defense against aggressors.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Eduard Bernstein, “Patriotismus, Militarismus und Sozialdemokratie,” in *SM* 11 (1907), pp. 435–437.

⁷⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Wie Fichte und Lassalle national waren,” in *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* 5 (1915), p. 161; and Bernstein, “Patriotismus und Klassenkampf,” pp. 130–136.

⁷⁵ Bernstein, “Patriotismus, Militarismus und Sozialdemokratie,” p. 437.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 439–440.

For Bernstein, “nationalism” was not an ideological ploy “invented” by the bourgeoisie in order to perpetuate exploitative economic relations. Any efforts aimed at indoctrinating the proletariat with abstract internationalist principles would run aground on the workers’ natural emotional attachment to Germany. The Marxist slogan of the “proletariat without a fatherland” was only valid as long as some segments of the population were systematically denied access to political power. The retention of the SPD’s “mushy cosmopolitanism” would result in pushing the proletariat into the arms of nationalist fanatics while also failing to attract progressive segments of the bourgeoisie.⁷⁸ As the 1907 elections showed, the SPD could no longer ignore the formation of a proletarian “nationalist consciousness;” the point was to keep it from turning toward exclusivist notions of race and ethnicity.⁷⁹

Thus, Bernstein also acknowledged the existence of a second, “perverted” form of nationalism, which he called *völkischer Nationalismus*, or “ethnonationalism.”⁸⁰ As Bernstein saw it, the latter was built on scientifically questionable categories that essentialized language, race, and heredity, and supported a politically reactionary turn to pre-industrial forms of solidarity. The justification of nation states on the basis of ethnic purity not only contradicted Bernstein’s cherished humanitarian ideals, but also harbored a dangerous logic of exclusivism that remained blind to the ethical purpose of the national idea as ultimately serving the ends of humanity.⁸¹

On this issue, however, Bernstein ran into a serious conceptual dilemma: how could he be so sure that the German proletariat would cling to the “healthy, noble” brand of nationalism and not its pernicious ethnic cousin? Unfortunately, he never clarified this crucial theme. Instead, with his characteristic evolutionary optimism, Bernstein declared ethnonationalism as a merely “artificial and pathological aberration” – a relatively short-lived phenomenon that would find its certain demise in the hands of the “noble patriotism” championed by the working class. On this issue, Bernstein seems to have forsaken his empiricist skepticism for an almost “Marxian” determinism by closing his eyes to the fact that ethnonationalism, both within and without the SPD, was rapidly acquiring strength. Were not his frequent literary battles with ultranationalist revisionists and his increasing alienation from the chauvinistic circle around *Sozialistische Monatshefte* editors like Bloch and Leuthner a clear reminder of the growing attraction of the supposed “aberration?”

⁷⁸ Bernstein, “Die internationale Politik der Sozialdemokratie,” in *SM* 13 (1909), p. 615.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 614–615.

⁸⁰ Bernstein, “Patriotismus, Militarismus, und Sozialdemokratie,” p. 437.

⁸¹ Bernstein, “Wie Fichte und Lassalle national waren,” p. 150.

Bernstein remained far too sanguine about the supposed demise of ethnonationalism *in the long run*: "In all countries where the working class assumes political significance, it develops a new, socialist variant of patriotism. This patriotism can never legitimate the domination of one nationality by another; rather, it leads to the realization of equal, democratic rights."⁸² In fact, he could not produce empirical evidence for such evolutionary assumptions. Exchanging Marx's internationalist-revolutionary dogmatism for his own equally mechanistic-evolutionary utopia of a "noble patriotism," Bernstein displayed a rationalist optimism which assumed that the ethical appeal to "practical reason" would ultimately be reciprocated by the masses. He was overly confident that the working class had the capacity to weigh rationally the arguments of both sides and ultimately sanction the "middle way" he had found, one that viewed the German nation as a "link in the organic chain of international civilization; independent *vis-à-vis* other nations on the basis of an international democratic equality of rights and duties."⁸³

As far as the *short-term* consequences of ethnonationalism were concerned, however, Bernstein did grasp its ominous consequences, including the possibility of an impending war of unknown proportions: "There is today no reaction so dangerous as the exuberance of the national spirit. Without exaggeration, one might call this phenomenon the mother of all reactionisms, for all are incorporated in it."⁸⁴ In the same vein, he condemned the imperialist policies of the "Prussian militaristic elite, detached from its own people" as a backward step in cultural development.⁸⁵

Overall, the practical consequences of Bernstein's "noble nationalism" were unmistakably clear: it surely played into the hands of nationalist revisionists who had long demanded an adjustment of "abstract internationalism" to the "concrete patriotic sentiments of the ordinary German worker." The German liberals ridiculed his "noble patriotism," embracing instead at least parts of the government's ethnonationalist propaganda with its anti-Semitic undertones. Only when directly confronted with their aggressive rhetoric couched within the framework of German *Weltpolitik* did Bernstein seem to recognize the magnitude of the problem: "But what disheartens one with the German Liberals is that they are opportunists in their ways of thinking and arguing. One can hardly find a

⁸² Bernstein, "Patriotismus, Militarismus, und Sozialdemokratie," p. 438.

⁸³ Bernstein, "Die internationale Politik der Sozialdemokratie," p. 615.

⁸⁴ Bernstein, "Geburtenrückgang, Nationalität, und Kultur," p. 1,497. See also Bernstein's critique of the arms race that might end in a "terrible catastrophe" (Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 128).

⁸⁵ Bernstein, "Patriotismus, Militarismus und Sozialdemokratie," p. 439.

consistent Free Trader amongst them. How can one expect to find a consistent peace politician?"⁸⁶

In particular, Bernstein was referring to the national-liberals as well as Friedrich Naumann's resistance to a German-British disarmament pact. Retreating to a classical Marxist position, he began to argue that the increasing jingoism of upper-class German liberalism was not merely ideological but practical, because of its material connection to the rapidly growing German military-industrial complex.⁸⁷ Only in such lonely moments of bitter disappointment, did Bernstein allow himself to see some wisdom in Kautsky's long-held conviction that Germany's only way out of political authoritarianism and the escalating arms race might be, after all, a proletarian-based "revolutionary upheaval."⁸⁸

In the long run, however, such sentiments passed, and Bernstein returned to his more fitting role of the optimistic apostle of gradualism and evolutionary socialism. Despite the depressing fact that even moderate academics and public intellectuals were beginning to preach ethnonationalism, he refused to let go of his Enlightenment rationalism. Surely, German people would "come to their senses" once the chauvinistic distortions and lies of the mainstream press were unmasked, wouldn't they? True to his ethical ideals, Bernstein kicked off an "educational campaign for political enlightenment," urging his British and French political friends to join his cause and speak out against ethnonationalism – especially now that the German Liberals had so "cowardly abandoned this task."⁸⁹ With unusual vehemence, he unleashed parliamentarian broadsides against the government's discriminatory ethnic policies toward, for example, Polish minorities in Silesia. Bernstein's impassioned indictments of the Crown Prince's hypernationalist speeches brought vitriolic calls to order by the Conservative President of the Reichstag.

When Erich von Falkenhayn, the popular German Secretary of War, skillfully employed his ethnonationalist interpretation of J. G. Fichte's famous *Addresses to the German Nation* in support of the government's imperialist policies, Bernstein answered with a speech emphasizing the liberal principles of the French Revolution embedded in Fichte's notion of national self-determination: "Fichte's patriotism purported to educate his people to liberty, to champion freedom. He was hostile to all chauvinism, to all exaggerated nationalism. Fichte was a democrat, Fichte

⁸⁶ Eduard Bernstein, "How the New Reichstag Will Look," in *The Nation* 10 (December 30, 1911), p. 551.

⁸⁷ Eduard Bernstein, "The Marauders," in *The Nation* 13 (April 26, 1913), p. 142.

⁸⁸ Eduard Bernstein, "Almighty, All-devouring Militarism," in *The Nation* 13 (April 5, 1913), p. 16.

⁸⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "Social Insanity," in *The Nation* 10 (October 14, 1911), p. 94.

was a republican, and, insofar as the era allowed, Fichte was a socialist.”⁹⁰ Expanding his arguments, Bernstein published a lengthy essay, entitled “The Nationalism of Fichte and Lassalle,” in which he challenged the Conservative minister’s influential interpretation.⁹¹

In fact, it is likely that Bernstein’s own basic assumption that patriotic sentiments could coexist with a humanistic commitment to cosmopolitan values emerged from an extremely sympathetic reading of Fichte’s political thought.⁹² Altogether bypassing the marked differences in the radical writings of the young admirer of the French Revolution from the more conservative essays of the anti-French defender of the “German Idea” composed after Napoleon’s 1806 victory at Jena, Bernstein readily offered his own idiosyncratic translation of Fichte’s seemingly paradoxical concept of a “patriotic cosmopolitanism”: “[It is] the sense of a noble patriotism which seeks for its own people a respected status in a republic of peoples without losing sight of the idea of a greater, composite republic.”⁹³ Like Fichte’s “dialectical” equation of “patriotism” with “internationalism,” Bernstein’s “noble patriotism” differed markedly from the Enlightenment understanding of cosmopolitanism proposed by Kant and Schiller. By failing to acknowledge Fichte’s questionable dialectical reinterpretation of these key concepts, Bernstein remained unaware that the Fichtean notion of a “cosmopolitan patriotism” was sufficiently ambivalent to permit Minister Falkenhayn’s ethnonationalist demands for a “Greater Germany” based on *Volkstum* and linguistic superiority.

When international tensions rose once again in the wake of Germany’s bellicose posture during the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911, Bernstein reacted sharply to the anti-British propaganda of those nationalists who were equating the foreign policy objectives of his admired English system with those of “Czarist despotism.” As early as the 1890s, the German government had commenced a gigantic naval buildup with the declared goal of challenging the long-standing hegemony of the British navy. Exploding its defense budget by nearly 400 percent in twelve years, Kaiser Wilhelm’s government encouraged the formation of a notoriously chauvinistic navy officer corps whose members took pride in contributing to the government’s highly effective public smear campaign against the allegedly “anti-German politics of Great Britain.” As one of the foremost

⁹⁰ Bernstein cited in Roger Fletcher, “Revisionism and Nationalism: Eduard Bernstein’s Views on the National Question, 1900–1914,” in *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 11.1 (1984), p. 106.

⁹¹ Bernstein, “Wie Fichte und Lassalle national waren,” pp. 143–162.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 151; see also Eduard Bernstein, *Von der Aufgabe der Juden im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Reiss, 1917), pp. 46–47.

⁹³ Bernstein, “Wie Fichte und Lassalle national waren,” p. 161.

experts on British politics in the Reichstag, Bernstein used the parliamentary stage to warn publicly against the emperor's militaristic "politics of the iron fist" against England. Reminding his socialist and bourgeois colleagues of the beneficial trade relations between the two nations, Bernstein emphasized that it would be "the most myopic and idiotic politics to turn the great English nation into Germany's enemy."⁹⁴

But since most ordinary German workers knew very little about British culture or British politics, Bernstein's denunciations of the government's vicious propaganda campaign fell on deaf ears. Even his short 1911 monograph, *The English Peril and the German People*, published by the party press with Bebel's full support, remained too limited in its outreach. From the very first lines, Bernstein attacked both Germany's aggressive foreign policy and the ethnonationalist hardliners within his own party. He condemned what he called the "irresponsible strategy of *Hetzpatrioten* [hate patriots]" whose "criminal agitation" could lead to a world-wide war.⁹⁵ Only in his closing remarks did he return to a more conciliatory attitude, suggesting the creation of a "Covenant of Peace among the Nations," which, following Kant's call for the establishment of "Perpetual Peace among Nations," would culminate in the application of international law within the context of a "great European republic of peoples."⁹⁶

As might be expected, Bernstein's theory of "noble patriotism" turned out to be too broadminded for most of his comrades, and he found himself squeezed between Kautsky's abstract Marxist internationalism and the aggressive ethnonationalism of his nationalist revisionist comrades. The battle lines between Marxism and revisionism were drawn: Bernstein's Aristotelian "middle position" on the national question drew nothing but ridicule and contempt. Even his strong endorsement of the famous resolution of the 1912 International Basle Conference, which called for a coordinated revolutionary strategy among the European proletariat in the case of war, failed to improve his tainted reputation in Left party circles whose members regarded him as a "half-and-half supporter of German imperialism."⁹⁷ Neither did his pronounced anti-Russian sentiments (occasionally even approaching Leuthner's slavophobic hysteria) increase his influence on the nationalist-revisionist *Weltpolitiker* of the movement which sought to wed German power politics with the imperialist goals of a "socialist world policy."

⁹⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *Die englische Gefahr und das deutsche Volk* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1911), p. 47.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹⁷ Georg Ledebour quoted in Fletcher, "Revisionism and Nationalism: Eduard Bernstein's Views on the National Question, 1900–1914," p. 111.

Even his well-meaning symbolic gestures in favor of massive disarmament and world peace provided ammunition for his critics. When Bernstein helped to organize the Carnegie Endowment-sponsored "Berne International Conference for the Facilitation of International Peace," he was immediately attacked by orthodox Marxists for letting himself be coopted by "dirty imperialist money." Conversely, nationalist revisionists ridiculed his mediating role as the deed of a sentimental "Anglophile," oblivious to "legitimate German national interests." In the end, Bernstein's search for alternatives to the rising tide of ethnonationalism left him with a theoretical model incapable of convincing either side that internationalism and patriotism should, or even could, be reconciled. In these last years before the outbreak of the Great War, it had become clear that what had begun as the SPD's "Revisionist Controversy" had turned into the "Nationalist Controversy" of German social democracy.

Colonialism and culture

Bernstein's views on nationalism indicate that while he supported the establishment of class-transcending alliances with left-liberals, he had not abandoned a socialist "class politics." He assigned the working class a leading role in modern society – not only on the basis of its enhanced economic productivity and increased social wealth, but also with regard to its crucial cultural task of refining ethical and spiritual dimensions in society. For Bernstein, the labor movement was both the bearer of "noble" forms of patriotism and the most appropriate evolutionary vehicle for the creation of a new "cultural philosophy," responsible for uplifting "culturally stagnant civilizations" and educating them for their eventual independence.¹ What he seems to have had in mind was the transformation of the Victorian "white man's burden" into the more class-oriented "burden of the proletariat." Although Bernstein's perspective on colonialism appears to correspond to similar comments made by Marx, Engels, and Lassalle on topics such as British colonialism in India, the national awakening of the Balkans, and the Austrian–Italian wars, it clashed with the anti-colonialism of a younger generation of German socialists who saw things quite differently.²

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the orthodox party leadership had largely abandoned Marx's and Engels' culturally biased defense of "the right of civilization against barbarism."³ Bebel, Kautsky, and Singer rejected colonialism as strengthening the accumulation process of capital as well as adding to the growth of militarism and the

¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Vorwort des Herausgebers," in David Koigen, *Die Kultur der Demokratie* (Jena: Diederichs, 1912), pp. iii–x.

² For the development of various socialist views on colonial policy, see Hans-Christoph Schröder, *Sozialismus und Imperialismus* (Bonn–Bad Godesberg: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1975); "Eduard Bernsteins Stellung zum Imperialismus vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, pp. 166–212; Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*; and Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Kolonialpolitik*.

³ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (September 10, 1848), in *MEW* 5, p. 395.

likelihood of colonial wars – a view shared by the “orthodox Bernstein” of the early 1880s.⁴ For example, in 1884 Bernstein sharply denounced Germany’s participation in the scramble for colonies, arguing that powerful trading companies would make huge profits on the backs of indigenous populations and disadvantaged German workers. Moving to London and falling under the influence of both Engels and the British free-trade tradition, however, caused the young socialist to change his perspective. He became acquainted with the “liberal imperialism” of Lord Rosebury and Sir Edward Grey who speculated that the formation of “white, democratic, and self-governing colonies” abroad might serve as a catalyst for the expansion of the desired democratization process at home. Increasingly affected by their arguments and impressed by the efficient performance of the British colonial administration, Bernstein soon began to distinguish among a “variety of quite different forms of imperialism,” ultimately acknowledging the “positive cultural, political, and economic effects” in its more “benign” manifestations.⁵ Having taken this initial step, he could now proceed to develop the necessary theoretical arguments in favor of an “acceptable socialist colonial policy.”⁶

His change of heart swiftly drew the attention of the British Marxist Belfort Bax, who, in his famous 1896–97 exchanges with the German exile had condemned colonialism in any form. Indeed, the Bax–Bernstein debates on foreign affairs marked the beginnings of what would explode into the “Revisionist Controversy” of German social democracy. Bax strongly endorsed a mild form of cultural relativism, stressing native peoples’ rights to maintain their traditional folkways and their own cultural forms of expression, adding that European colonialist practices would merely prolong capitalism’s lease on life by exporting it around the globe.⁷ Bernstein response was quick and harsh. He ridiculed Bax’s “naïve Rousseauian ideal of the ‘noble savage’” and shrewdly invoked the authority of the “fathers of modern socialism” in support of his thesis celebrating the “civilizing effects” of capitalist expansion.⁸ But unlike his mentors, Bernstein employed economic arguments only as the final element in a long chain of reasoning that originated in his Victorian naturalism. In particular, his “socialist colonialism” was indissolubly

⁴ See, for example, Anonymous, “Marx über das Kolonialsystem,” in *Der Sozialdemokrat* 28 (July 10, 1884).

⁵ Schröder, “Eduard Bernsteins Stellung zum Imperialismus vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der demokratische Sozialismus*, p. 169.

⁶ See also Gerhard A. Ritter, *Die Arbeiterbewegung im Wilhelminischen Reich* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1959), p. 194.

⁷ Bax, “Our German Fabian Convert; or, Socialism According to Bernstein;” and “The Socialism of Bernstein,” in *MS*, pp. 61–64, 69–74.

⁸ Eduard Bernstein, “Amongst the Philistines: A Rejoinder to Belfort Bax,” in *ibid.*, pp. 65–69.

linked with his rather reductionistic biological–anthropological views on sexuality and instincts.⁹

For Bernstein, human sexual behavior evolved from “animallike” stages of “uncontrolled desires” to higher forms, where emerging economic, legal, and ethical impulses joined together to subject sexuality to social rules, thus making it less driven by “natural necessity” and hence more “rational” or “cultured.”¹⁰ In the course of their evolution, humans were moving through ever more pronounced cultural levels, emerging from preliminary stages of “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “half-civilization,” to “advanced stages” of “civilization” where they supposedly learned “to let their sensuality be sublimated by such activities and tastes as intellectual training, physical self-discipline, and mental self-control.”¹¹ As a direct consequence of their uncontrolled sex drive, “savages” remained prisoners of non-rational forms of social interaction, manifested as “superstition, vanity, and primitive play.”¹² Moreover, they subscribed to a limited tribal ethic that conflicted with rational universalism, the rule of secular law, and individual choice. Although he underscored that “proper cultural development” manifested itself in the “control of drives, not in their *suppression*,” Bernstein nonetheless recommended that (heterosexual) couples ought to subordinate sexual pleasures to intellectual endeavors and the aesthetic refinement of taste, thereby contributing to a “general uplifting” and thus the “evolution” of their society’s culture.¹³

With such a theory of cultural evolution as its theoretical foundation, Bernstein’s defense of “appropriate forms of socialist colonialism” focused on the alleged “right of higher civilizations over that of lower cultures,” which he defended as a “hard-earned privilege” of societies whose rationalism was reflected in advanced forms of economic

⁹ Eduard Bernstein’s Victorian views on sexuality and sexual hygiene were obviously so highly esteemed in the SPD that he was asked to put together an official SPD pamphlet on sexuality and sexual hygiene, *Der Geschlechtstrieb* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1920). In this monograph, Bernstein naturalizes gender relations on the basis of sexual behavior: “The male sexual drive is much stronger than that of the female” (pp. 13–15). Moreover, he discusses, among other things, “abnormalities and perverted forms of sexuality,” like masturbation, homosexuality, sodomy, and sadism/masochism. In spite of his negative judgment on homosexuality, Bernstein anticipated Wilhelm Reich’s argument that homosexuality was only partly pathological; mostly it was the product of “unhygienic social conditions” which would disappear in the course of a “healthy” social development toward heterosexuality. See, Eduard Bernstein, *Bernstein on Homosexuality* (London: Athol Books, 1977), a translation of Bernstein’s 1895 *Neue Zeit* essays on homosexuality in the context of Oscar Wilde’s famous trial.

¹⁰ Eduard Bernstein, *Der Geschlechtstrieb*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² Bernstein, “Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und modernes Geschlechtsleben,” n. d., in *Bernstein A*, E120.

¹³ Bernstein, *Der Geschlechtstrieb*, pp. 17–18.

organization as well.¹⁴ Such “cultural rights” also implied the “moral duty” of Western cultures to colonize the Third World, and – echoing the famous provision in Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* – their economic obligation to “improve the productivity of the land, lift its population density, and advance technology.”¹⁵ “Indolent savages” lacked the cultural legitimacy to deny “more advanced peoples” access to the dormant economic resources of their territories. Technological know-how was the indispensable precondition for the “healthy evolution of the forces of production” and thus the spread of civilization, “gradually” leading to the socialization of the capitalist system. Indeed, Bernstein’s cultural Darwinism even justified the existence of violent struggles between different cultures, which, no doubt, would end with the “self-assertion of the higher civilization.” The lesson for social democracy was clear: “Socialists should finally accept the higher culture’s ensuing guardianship over the vanquished peoples and stop their romantic fight against windmills.” After all, Bernstein noted, “even the proletariat has a legitimate interest in a reasonable geographical expansion of the nation.”¹⁶

The familiar Enlightenment theme endorsing the rational attainment of human freedom through the subjugation of nature reappeared in Bernstein’s theory of socialist colonialism as a “self-evident” cultural injunction, for “culture” itself was defined as “the conscious dominance of man over nature; the manifestation of the principle of individual personality; and the refinement and diversification of proper tastes.”¹⁷ Only by transcending the mechanical cause–effect operations of “blind nature” in cooperative social arrangements could humans ultimately approach the “socialist ideal.”¹⁸ Similar to Marx’s theory, Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism retained the crucial concept of rational economic planning.

However, Bernstein’s “right of the higher civilization” did not translate into the realist paradigm of his nationalist-revisionist comrades, who, literally, offered *carte blanche* for the vigorous pursuit of German colonial interests by *any* means necessary. Rather, Bernstein made colonialist expansion dependent on a number of specific social and

¹⁴ Eduard Bernstein, “Der Sozialismus und die Kolonialfrage,” in *SM* 4 (1900), p. 559; “Die Kolonialfrage und der Klassenkampf,” p. 989; and “Der Klassenkampf und der Fortschritt der Kultur,” in *SM* 15 (1911), pp. 1,165–1,169.

¹⁵ Eduard Bernstein, “Der Sozialismus und die Kolonialfrage,” pp. 549–554.

¹⁶ Bernstein, “Die Kolonialfrage und der Klassenkampf,” pp. 989, 996.

¹⁷ Eduard Bernstein, “Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und modernes Geschlechtsleben.”

¹⁸ Eduard Bernstein, “Arbeiterbewegung und Kultur,” *Dokumente des Fortschritts* 1 (1908), pp. 523–530.

political preconditions. Most importantly, he sought to connect the legitimacy of colonial policies with the degree of political democracy established in the colonializing country. Given the underdeveloped democratic structure of the Wilhelmine Empire in which parliament lacked any control of foreign policy, the very existence of "colonial policies" devoid of working-class input was highly objectionable. As noted above, Bernstein employed this argument not only against his own nationalist-revisionist comrades, but also against Friedrich Naumann's and Max Weber's national-liberal vision of a German *Weltpolitik*, comparing it unfavorably with the more democratic and libertarian forms of British and French colonial policy.¹⁹

In addition, Bernstein sought to link his support of colonialism to the *modus operandi* by which indigenous people were "civilized." Insisting on a proper application of "ethical methods" *vis-à-vis* the native population, he echoed Kant's reservations against the ill-treatment of primal societies by European powers. On many occasions, Bernstein condemned the "unspeakable atrocities" committed by Western imperialist forces and demanded that colonial powers "humanize their actions."²⁰ At the 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Socialist International, for example, he and his revisionist comrade Eduard David, pressed hard to make such an ethical proviso part of an official pro-colonialist resolution: "The expansion of the capitalist economy will continue, regardless of whether we like it or not, or whether we pass resolutions for or against it. We cannot prevent its *occurrence*, but we can influence its *forms* and *methods* in favor of a more humanitarian society."²¹ Yet by endorsing colonialist practices *in principle*, both men could merely "deplore" the amount of human suffering connected with this process without being able to guarantee the implementation of politically binding moral resolutions or an effective system for monitoring frequently occurring violations and atrocities.

Finally, Bernstein argued for the establishment of international institutions to settle disputes among "cultured nations" arising from their colonial endeavors in a peaceful manner. Following the proposal of British Secretary Grey to press for a full institutionalization of global principles of conflict resolution through a neutral international court, he suggested the coordination of international policies that would curb the escalation of militarism, the menacing naval build-up on both sides of the Channel, and the most flagrant forms of economic protectionism.²² Abandoning his

¹⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "Socialdemokratie und Imperialismus," in *SM* 4 (1900), pp. 238–251.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in Hans Reis, ed., *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 106.

²¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Kulturrecht und Kulturfrage," in *Vorwärts* 23.2 (October 4, 1907).

²² Bernstein, *Sozialdemokratische Völkerpolitik*, pp. 54–58.

reserved demeanor, he scolded the nationalist protectionists in the SPD, demanding that they modify their “myopic” position.²³

Indeed, Bernstein’s passionate commitment to the principles of free trade and his sharp denunciation of protective tariffs became one of the hallmarks of his liberal socialism.²⁴ On these important issues, Bernstein once again found himself profoundly inspired by the British liberal tradition. In particular, he seemed to warm up to Richard Cobden’s and Herbert Spencer’s economic evolutionism which postulated a positive correlation between increased international trade relations and the preservation of world peace.²⁵

But the powerful protectionists in the German labor movement did not even bother to contemplate what they considered Bernstein’s “British hogwash.” Their rejection of free-trade policies provided an important ideological focus for nationalist revisionists like Max Schippel and Wolfgang Heine, who felt that protective tariffs best supported the domestic industrial base, and thus ultimately secured Germany’s position of power in the world. The issue of protectionism soon came to a head in a major dispute involving Bernstein and his employer, Joseph Bloch. Bernstein’s aggressive article in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* condemned Bloch’s categorical rejection of free-trade principles as “a deplorable regression from sophisticated theoretical considerations to coarse empirical arguments.”²⁶ When Bloch demanded an apology, Bernstein refused; he merely provided a symbolic gesture of reconciliation in his qualified approval of very moderate protectionistic measures like targeted state subventions of certain industrial and agricultural sectors.

The SPD’s growing internal differences regarding the issues of nationalism, colonialism, and culture made painfully apparent that Bernstein’s model of evolutionary socialism had only inadequately addressed the party’s emerging instrumentalism – its willingness to separate ethical means from political ends. Increasingly, this inclination to abandon ethical principles at the expense of the organizational expansion of social democracy surfaced in the “realist” speeches of both party *Praktiker* and left-wing radicals. Even Kautsky’s orthodox-Marxist faction showed itself increasingly willing to support reformism as long as the party paid lip

²³ Eduard Bernstein, *Völkerrecht und Völkerpolitik* (Berlin: 1919), p. 184.

²⁴ See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, “Die Britischen Arbeiter und der zollpolitische Imperialismus,” in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 19 (1904); “Germany and the Limitation of Armaments,” in *The Nation* 1 (April 6, 1907); “Die Internationale Politik der Sozialdemokratie,” in *SM* 13 (1909); “How the New Reichstag will look,” in *The Nation* 10 (December 30, 1911); “A Sacrifice to Folly,” in *The Nation* 12 (March 15, 1913).

²⁵ See Schröder, “Eduard Bernsteins Stellung zum Imperialismus vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in Heimann and Meyer, *Bernstein und der Demokratische Sozialismus*, p. 183.

²⁶ Eduard Bernstein, “Zollfreier Internationaler Verkehr,” in *SM* 15 (1911), p. 831.

service to the ultimate “transformation of capitalism.” Once again, Bernstein found himself without a reliable and sizeable base of support in the party which made the practical translation of his socialist colonialism a purely academic issue.²⁷ Torn between moral imperatives for the establishment of a “just” international institutional framework and the necessary realism of a consequentialist political agenda, Bernstein’s pitch for a “more humane theory of colonialism” went unheeded. The whole episode represented just another variant of the precarious theoretical balancing act so typical of his entire political thought.²⁸

Indeed, Bernstein’s simultaneous acknowledgment of Germany’s “cultural right” to pull even with other colonial powers and his ethical criticism of the connection between Germany’s aggressive foreign policy and its colonial policy must have sounded rather confused in the ears of both Marxist internationalists and nationalist revisionists.²⁹ Moreover, his liberal-evolutionist approach to issues of foreign policy must have struck them as being theoretically inconsistent, practically unworkable, and politically out of touch with existing conditions in Germany. Unwilling to follow Bernstein’s theoretical quest, orthodox Marxists, nationalist revisionists, and atheoretical *Praktiker* alike distanced themselves even further from his evolutionary socialism, fearing that Bernstein’s “excessive self-reflection” would “hurt” their “cause” in the long run.³⁰ As a result, his waning capital with the main players in the SPD was even further depleted. Still, this was only the beginning of a long series of political disappointments.

The victory of the “party bureaucrats”

As the first decade of the new century was drawing to a close, the character of the SPD was undergoing fundamental change. Despite the initial success of Bebel’s and Kautsky’s ideological campaign against “revisionism,” both nationalist revisionists and party *Praktiker* had proven themselves extremely capable of finding their way into key positions of social democracy’s expanding bureaucracy. Grasping the crucial importance for the electoral logic for the expansion of a mass-based party, this “new guard” of “revisionist” party bureaucrats glorified the centralization of

²⁷ See also Wolfram Wette, *Kriegstheorien Deutscher Sozialisten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 125–144; Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Sozialpolitik*, p. 150; and Schröder, “Eduard Bernsteins Stellung zum Imperialismus vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” pp. 184–188.

²⁸ Bernstein, “Vorwort,” in *Sozialdemokratische Völkerpolitik*.

²⁹ This is the core argument of Fletcher’s negative judgment of Bernstein’s theoretical contribution to socialist theory. See Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, pp. 183–188.

³⁰ Heine cited in *EB*, p. 131.

power and their atheoretical instrumentalism as the most appropriate shield against any policy or theoretical initiative that might endanger the SPD's popularity at the polls. Feeling the reins of power slowly slipping through his fingers, the ageing Bebel grew irritable and suspicious, even going so far as to accuse his old friend Auer of siding with the "revisionist" cause. Instead of denying Bebel's charge outright, the pragmatic Auer humorously challenged the Marxist "church fathers" to provide a workable definition of "revisionism," asking them with feigned ignorance and surprise: "How do you identify a 'revisionist'? What does such a specimen look like?"³¹

In fact, both Bebel and Auer had a point. On one hand, bureaucratization and the emphasis on the "national question" had clearly begun to transform the Marxist character of social democracy. The German labor movement was in the process of losing its ideological identity; the once-stellar status of political theory and its Marxist interpreters deteriorated even further. On the other hand, as Bernstein never tired of emphasizing, the so-called "revisionist current" in the SPD was far from being a monolithic edifice. Comprised of various factions and loosely organized around certain personalities and political issues, as well as theoretical outlook, various "revisionists" tended to pursue different political agendas, which made it extremely difficult for them to speak effectively in a unified voice. As Auer realized, the process of ideological and political diversification, kicked off by Bernstein's intervention, proceeded with breath-taking speed. It had indeed become virtually impossible to provide a clear definition of a single form of "revisionism" that would do justice to the variety of its gradations.

Kautsky, on the other hand, still believed in clear lines of demarcation. Arguing that the revisionist movement had separated into at least two or three distinct camps, he at least offered a conceptual roadmap that made it easier to survey the "ideological damage."³² The small intellectual and politically impotent faction around Bernstein, David, and Kampffmeyer stood for a consequent reformism based on ethical socialist principles. Bernstein and his friends highly valued the critical function of their "evolutionary socialism" in providing the guiding principles of a binding framework for political practice. Nationalist revisionists, on the other hand, limited their theoretical involvement to cultural and economic issues which directly addressed their overriding concerns with the "national interests" of the German working class. Finally, the rapidly growing faction of *Praktiker* sneered at theoretical debates altogether. Eager to advance in the sprawling network of socialist bureaucracy, they skillfully

³¹ Auer cited in *EB*, p. 97.

³² Karl Kautsky, "Der Dresdener Parteitag," in *NZ* 21.2 (1902/03), pp. 809–815.

used Bebel's own anti-intellectualism to discredit the function of political theory, hoping that their strategy would eventually weaken the power position of the old "Marxist" guard. Digesting the lessons of previous party conferences, the *Praktiker* understood that they had to proceed extremely cautiously and refrain from openly challenging Bebel's leadership. They also realized that it was actually in their long-term interest to support his "anti-revisionist" resolutions, for growing rifts over "meaningless theory" in the labor movement would hurt its political effectiveness and thus their own careers.³³ As long as Bebel maintained his posture of revolutionary *attentisme*, the actual reformist practice of the SPD remained unaffected.

The great majority of the *Praktiker* were hard-nosed careerists, emotionally divorced from the pioneering days of the "Eisenacher Era" and increasingly indifferent to the old heroic "proletarian ethos" of the Bismarck Era. Considering themselves "managers" more than ideologues, they focused almost exclusively on the organizational expansion of the labor movement. For example, when Friedrich Ebert, the future first president of the Weimar Republic, assumed his new duties as Secretary-General of the SPD's Executive Office in Berlin, he was shocked by its unbusinesslike conditions. Yet, it took him and his operatives only a few years to build up a well-oiled bureaucratic structure, ensuring, among other things, that each party office was equipped with a typewriter and a telephone. By 1911, the party had amassed more than 800,000 members and organized almost 400 local party branches run by thousands of salaried and volunteer functionaries. In 1909, the free trade unions proudly announced having surpassed the 2,000,000 membership threshold with a dues-based income approaching 53,000,000 marks. Under Ebert's leadership, the receipts of the SPD's Executive Office alone exceeded 1,300,000 marks, allowing the party to use more than 500,000 marks for educational projects, workers' recreation, propaganda, press and other party-related matters.³⁴

The fact that the party was now in the position of paying Ebert and other top functionaries at least three times the wages of a skilled worker meant that the labor movement had begun to attract professional bureaucrats with little ideological interest.³⁵ This is not to say that *Praktiker* like Ebert, Philip Scheidemann, and Hermann Müller weren't committed to the social advancement of the working class. But they merely contented themselves with running their daily affairs without

³³ In general, Bernstein agreed with Kautsky's classification. See Bernstein, *Von der Sekte zur Partei*, p. 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–36.

³⁵ See Peter-Christian Witt, *Friedrich Ebert* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1987), p. 51.

having to engage in “abstract” matters of political theory, lofty socialist “ideals,” or dry “Marxology.” The development of party strategy and tactics, however, was a different matter altogether. As long as party theorists like Karl Kautsky wrote their articles with only scant relevance to tactical considerations, *Praktiker* hardly interfered, treating the matter as the insignificant hobby-horse of socialist intellectuals. When the SPD theorists touched on matters of immediate political importance, however, they proved themselves to be far less tolerant. This is not to say that they could dispose of old-timers like Kautsky and Bernstein at will. Still, the growing power of the party bureaucrats translated directly into their increasing ability to exert meaningful pressure on leading theorists to stay away from the SPD’s “real political affairs.” Hence, Bernstein’s untiring forays into the realm of socialist theory managed to draw not only the wrath of the orthodox Marxist theorists, but the stern disapproval of the *Praktiker* as well as those union leaders who perceived the ensuing “unpleasant” public debates on theory as obstructions to the “important business of the movement.”

The gradual loss of Karl Kautsky’s theoretical influence and his relative autonomy as the party’s “chief ideologist” serves as a rather impressive example of these developments. In 1909, Kautsky published *The Road to Power*, his orthodox Marxist credo affirming the importance of revolutionary principles and the continued validity of a Marxist analysis of economic development. In 1891, similar passages received social democracy’s full approval, constituting the bulk of the theoretical portion of the SPD’s party program. Seventeen years later, with the Erfurt Program still “officially” in place, Kautsky’s terminology evoked a harsh reaction from the Executive Committee. Even the ageing Bebel, generally in agreement with his friend’s ideological perspective, had to bow to the pressure orchestrated by both the *Praktiker* and the increasingly vociferous trade-union leaders, predictably drawing Kautsky’s ire: “August’s [Bebel’s] difficulty depresses me the most . . . The word ‘revolution’ seems to give him naked physical discomfort . . . August was for years the only fighter . . . Now he is exhausted.”³⁶

Rejecting *The Road to Power* as “scandalous” in its “dogmatic rigidity” even after a hastily convened special arbitration committee had intervened in Kautsky’s favor, the Executive Committee categorically refused to authorize the pamphlet’s republication and further redistribution.³⁷ Caught between the rock of atheoretical pragmatism and the hard place of Luxemburg’s and Liebknecht’s radicalism (which charged that he had not gone far enough), a frustrated Kautsky capitulated to the Executive

³⁶ Kautsky cited in J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, vol. I. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966), p. 409.

³⁷ Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany*, p. 232.

Committee. Making its triumph complete, he even agreed to remove some of the Marxist hyperbole from a number of passages referring to revolutionary tactics. Although a recent study shows that Kautsky's alterations may have only amounted to a slight change in emphasis, the fact remains that the "Pope of Marxism" was forced to acknowledge the changed power constellations.³⁸ Realizing that the new generation of "party bureaucrats" was no longer willing to honor his tacit understanding with Bebel (who had granted him a high degree of intellectual autonomy), Kautsky secretly complained about "these [pragmatist] oafs who want to show the intellectuals their proper place . . . as mere sycophants, obediently carrying out their commands."³⁹ Suddenly, he seemed to forget that, only few years before, he and Bebel had used similar tactics to demote "revisionist intellectuals" like Kurt Eisner. Ultimately, Kautsky was forced to swallow this bitter pill and accept his diminished role or face the possibility of losing the editorship of *Neue Zeit*. Within the next few years, he even adapted the language of orthodox Marxism to the satisfaction of the *Praktiker*, going so far as to abandon the notion of proletarian exclusiveness.⁴⁰

Bernstein, on the other hand, initially mistook the bureaucratization of the SPD as evidence for the greater acceptance of his evolutionary socialist model with its "strong focus on administrative and parliamentary activity."⁴¹ Had he listened closely to the warnings issued by more critical voices in the party, he might have paid more attention to these early signs of structural petrification. The ossifying German labor movement of the early twentieth century served the prominent left-wing sociologist Robert Michels as the model for his influential 1911 study, *On the Sociology of Parties in Modern Democracy*, which maintained that all large-scale organizations inevitably develop along an "iron law of oligarchy."⁴² Michels' astute observations described the formation of an inert mass membership which left the main political decisions to an intricate leadership network which controlled the gigantic administrative party apparatus.

Bernstein disagreed, rising to attack the "one-sided character of Michels' generalizations," and defending the supposedly "democratic

³⁸ John H. Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky*, p. 10.

³⁹ Karl Kautsky to Hugo Haase (March 9, 1909) in Ursula Ratz, "Briefe zum Erscheinen von Karl Kautsky's *Weg zur Macht*," in *International Review of Social History* 12 (1967), pp. 465-466.

⁴⁰ Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany*, p. 244.

⁴¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Das vergrabene Pfund und die Taktik der Sozialdemokratie," in *SM* 12 (1906), pp. 292-294.

⁴² See Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie* (Leipzig: Kroner, 1925).

character” of the party, specifically its open elections which ensured that SPD leaders remained fully accountable to the membership.⁴³ In addition, he felt that Michels’ argument relied too heavily on “soft” psychological variables, such as the “gratitude of the masses toward their leaders” and its role in “securing elite rule.” For his part, Bernstein defended both the legitimacy and necessity for a professional leadership, as long as it was connected to frequent elections and technical expertise and competence.

However, he *did* concur with one core argument of Michels’ critique: like the orthodox Marxists before them, the party bureaucrats continued to perpetuate the old incongruence between the revolutionary language of German social democracy and its reformist practice for purely instrumental reasons.⁴⁴ After attending the SPD’s 1906 Mannheim Conference, Max Weber came to a similar conclusion, arguing that, despite its radical rhetoric, the increasingly bureaucratized SPD constituted no revolutionary threat and had become openly accommodationist in its party tactics: “Mannheim was a miserable affair . . . There were all the extremely petty-bourgeois attitudes, the self-satisfied physiognomies of innkeepers, the lack of *élan*, and the inability to move to the right if the road to the left is blocked or appears to be so – these [socialist] gentlemen no longer scare anyone.”⁴⁵ Ironically, the “Marxist” Kautsky concurred:

Those around David and the trade unionists believe that the moment is opportune to rid the party of all “Marxism.” They will hardly get away with simply kicking us out, but they dominate the Executive and fill one position after another with their people. In so doing, they have established an almost unbearable terrorism. They wish to . . . condemn us to the role of dumb animals.”⁴⁶

In these last years before the Great War, the *Praktiker* were successful in subordinating theoretical imperatives to the tactical demands of the moment. They “tamed” orthodox Marxist theorists like Kautsky and isolated ethical reformists like Bernstein; anyone who threatened their logic of organizational expansion was fair game for their attacks. Michels’ and Weber’s pessimistic assessments of the dangers of bureaucratization triumphed over Bernstein’s more positive expectations. By simply adjusting social democracy to electoral imperatives and the existing political framework of the Wilhelmine Empire, the new party bureaucrats duplicated the static, utilitarian objectives of their “class enemies.” Indeed,

⁴³ Eduard Bernstein, “Die Demokratie in der Sozialdemokratie,” in *SM* 14 (1908), pp. 1,107–1,114.

⁴⁴ Bernstein, “Das vergrabene Pfund und die Taktik der Sozialdemokratie,” p. 292.

⁴⁵ Max Weber cited in Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany*, p. 255.

⁴⁶ Kautsky to Adler (February 11, 1915), *Adler BW*, p. 611.

their support for a “negative integration” of the socialist subculture into the dominant culture of the bourgeoisie has been amply documented by prominent historians of socialist thought.⁴⁷

Coming from different ideological camps, both Bernstein and Kautsky unwittingly contributed to the general devaluation of theory in the SPD. Their sustained ideological wars had empowered a number of other “unorthodox” voices within the movement to use the cloak of “revisionism” in their battle against Marxist theorists and then drop altogether the theoretical and ethical underpinnings of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism in the name of *praxis* and the “interests of the German proletariat.” The “Father of Revisionism” himself had provided the *Praktiker* with a language of reformism, which, following his slogan of “paying greater attention to the daily business of leading a mass movement,” seemed merely to execute his demands. While Bernstein’s theoretically anchored “liberal socialism” remained an edifying, but toothless construct, Kautsky’s Marxist orthodoxy was reduced to a purely apologetic, docile, and reactive enterprise.

How did the SPD’s radical left wing fare in this new constellation of power? Though lacking access to the bureaucratic levers of real power, Luxemburg and Liebknecht at least managed to muster a last theoretical challenge to the new party bureaucrats at the 1912 Chemnitz Party Conference. But in the name of maintaining “working-class unity” as well as the “existing material interests of our proletarian electorate,” the *Praktiker* easily pressured Kautsky’s Marxists to help them defeat Luxemburg’s internationalist proposals and her fervent pleas to the party leadership to organize radical mass action for suffrage reform. The new generation of party bureaucrats had “grown up,” proving that they had even outdone their predecessors in mastering the fine art of juggling their Marxist tradition with their instrumentalist objectives. As a contemporary saying had it, they hung on to Marxist doctrine as if it were Sunday china; on proud display only because it was never used.

The Great War

August Bebel’s death in 1913 and the subsequent promotion of Friedrich Ebert as co-chairman of the SPD symbolized the final demise of the old “Eisenacher Party.” A new era was dawning, and Bernstein sensed that the labor movement was facing a difficult future. Disappointed and

⁴⁷ See, for example, Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism*; Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus*; and Vernon L. Lidke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

increasingly irritated by the growing appeal of ethnonationalism, he spoke of the “moral decay” of Germany’s progressive forces in failing to provide a unified front against militarism and imperialism. His articles reflected his more sober attitude: “It is no use concealing the truth. The hold of militarism on the German nation is depressingly great, and in the middle classes it is certainly stronger than ever before.”⁴⁸ Perhaps it had begun to dawn on Bernstein that the formation of a democratic left-liberal alliance was impossible as long as the Kaiser and his chancellors were able to find a majority to pass the item that mattered most: the federal budget which financed much of the armed forces.⁴⁹ Indeed, the central theme that made possible this consistent provision of support for the Empire after 1890 was the lasting agreement of the entire non-socialist spectrum on the government’s nationalist *Weltpolitik*.

The outbreak of World War I in early August 1914 confirmed Bernstein’s worst fears concerning the likely consequences of the undiminished arms race and the escalation of Germany’s economic protectionism. Within days, the Second International – the allegedly “eternal covenant of peace, freedom, and equality”⁵⁰ – was buried under a feverish wave of nationalist enthusiasm. Rather than rejecting what Karl Liebknecht called the “imperialist war” of the “international clique of capitalist oppressors,” the leadership of the German labor movement decided “not to abandon the fatherland in its hour of danger.”⁵¹ Like most of his comrades in the SPD, Bernstein was overwhelmed by the frantic unfolding of events. To add to the confusion, the Imperial Government did an excellent job of keeping crucial pieces of information from the social democratic Reichstag representatives, thus depriving Bernstein and his comrades of an accurate basis from which to judge the true nature of the Russian and British war initiatives.

From July 31 to August 4, the party swayed between the extremes of considering organized anti-war demonstrations and exuberantly upholding the “sacred cause of the German nation.” SPD co-chairman Hugo Haase and Karl Liebknecht pleaded with the party to reject the government’s request for war credits, thereby signaling to the Kaiser the SPD’s determined anti-war stance. However, the party’s nationalist-revisionist

⁴⁸ Eduard Bernstein, “The Meaning of the Strassburg Verdict,” in *The Nation* 14 (January 17, 1914), p. 673.

⁴⁹ Thomas Ertman, “Liberalization and Democratization in 19th and 20th-Century Germany in Comparative Perspective,” paper prepared for the 1995 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Liebknecht, “Vorwort,” in *Protokoll des Internationalen Arbeiter-Congresses zu Paris. Abgehalten vom 14 bis 20 Juli 1889* (Nürnberg, 1890).

⁵¹ For the German Reichstag debates on the eve of World War I, see *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags, XIII Legislaturperiode, II Session, Bd. 306* (Berlin, 1919).

faction, represented by David, Cunow, Ebert, Noske, and Scheidemann, prevailed. Their appealing slogans in favor of Germany's "right to its territorial defense," the "destruction of Czarist despotism," and the "defense of freedom and our German culture" resonated with the majority of the party delegates. On August 4, 1914, the SPD leadership came to the fateful decision in favor of war credits, thus officially signaling its support for the government's war policies. The party subsequently agreed to uphold a general social truce – a so-called *Burgfrieden* – indicating the SPD's willingness to forgo its political opposition to their non-socialist "class enemies" and its public criticism of the government for the entire duration of the war.⁵²

Tricked by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's secrecy regarding the German invasion of neutral Belgium, and believing false government assurances that Germany had issued its declaration of war against Russia only to avert the invasion of East Prussia, Bernstein voted with the party in favor of granting the war credits.⁵³ It appears that his pacifist outlook had been severely shaken by crushing reports of the assassination of his much admired French comrade Jean Jaurès, allegedly murdered by an undercover agent of Czar Nicholas II. However, as more information about the government's actual war policies leaked out, Bernstein's attitude began to change, and he soon questioned Germany's motives, arguing that in the 1870s even Marx and Engels had supported Prussia's war against France only as long as it could be justifiably deemed a "defensive war."⁵⁴ Exhorting his SPD comrades to acknowledge the aggressive nature of German war policy, he now looked back on his decision to vote with the party in favor of the war credits as the "darkest day" in his political life. Ten years later, he would confess to wishing that the party had called a general strike, which, even if unsuccessful, would have proven the labor movement's utmost efforts toward fulfilling its moral duty of preventing an imperialist war.⁵⁵

As early as October 1914, Bernstein was convinced of the German government's war guilt, and he contacted Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour – both representatives of Kautsky's orthodox Marxism – in order to work out a coherent anti-war position within the party. This

⁵² For an excellent treatment of the "Politics of August 4," see Susanne Miller, *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf: Die Deutsche Sozialdemokratie im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974); and Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus*.

⁵³ For a recent biography of Bethmann Hollweg, see Günther Wollstein, *Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg: Letzter Erbe Bismarcks, erstes Opfer der Dolchstoßlegende* (Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt, 1995).

⁵⁴ Eduard Bernstein, "Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels in der zweiten Phase des Krieges von 1870/71," in *NZ* 33.1 (1914/15), pp. 76–80.

⁵⁵ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 145.

dramatic change of attitude alienated Eduard David, one of Bernstein's closest revisionist friends, and avid supporter of the German war effort. Once again, Bernstein was left to fight the good fight on his own. Protesting both the strident nationalist tone of *Sozialistische Monatshefte* and Bloch's refusal to print his latest article against the government's vicious anti-British propaganda, Bernstein resigned from the journal. Given his fifteen years of dedicated service, including his fundraising efforts and intellectual contributions, this break was truly extraordinary.⁵⁶

As Susanne Miller has pointed out, by late 1914, Bernstein's anti-war position was firm, based upon his rejection of the government's open desire for annexation, its brutal method of warfare, and its deceptive strategy of selling the German people on aggression and expansionism by presenting these in the guise of a "defensive war" thrust upon the nation from without.⁵⁷ Throughout 1915, he supported a quick end to the war and established close contact with members of the "New Fatherland Association," a non-partisan, international organization actively pursuing peace issues, the improvement of international communication, and global democratization. With sister organizations in several European countries, like the British "Cobden Club" and the "Union for Democratic Control," Bernstein and the "New Fatherland Association" also attracted other pacifist intellectuals, like Lujo Brentano and Albert Einstein, and networked with prominent British war dissenters like Ramsay MacDonald, Charles James Fox, John Bright, and Henry Campbell-Bannerman.

The dramatic impact of a fully mechanized world war waged in the name of nationalism achieved what years of theoretical dispute seemed to have separated forever: a renewal of the bonds between the ageing veterans, Bernstein and Kautsky. Already in 1912, the former "socialist twins" had resumed their correspondence; three years later, their renewed affiliation bore its first intellectual fruits in the formulation of their "Peace Manifesto," published in June 1915 in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. Entitled "The Need of the Hour," the widely read document was also signed by Hugo Haase. Using radical humanist language, the authors indicted the cruelty of modern warfare, German expansionism, and the deceptive tactics of the Imperial Government. Implicit in the manifesto was Bernstein's strong challenge to the party's *Praktikerfraktion* to cancel the

⁵⁶ See Bernstein's correspondence with Joseph Bloch and Wolfgang Heine in Dieter Fricke, "Zum Bruch Eduard Bernsteins mit den 'Sozialistischen Monatsheften' im Herbst 1914," in *BzG* (1975/3), pp. 454-468.

⁵⁷ Susanne Miller, "Bernstein's Political Position, 1914-1920," in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 97.

Burgfrieden with the government and abstain from or vote against war credits in the future.⁵⁸

The SPD's Parliamentary Committee reacted to the document by commissioning both Bernstein and David with drafting official guidelines about the party's war and foreign-policy objectives. Based upon the cardinal principles of the Second International, the right to national self-determination, and the rejection of Germany's aggressive war policy – including an open renunciation of any German annexationist demands – Bernstein's draft clearly reflected the minority view. A full two-thirds of the party delegates not only adopted David's nationalist "Peace Manifesto," which justified the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and rejected reparation payments to a neutral Belgium, but also added an amendment disapproving of the restoration of a sovereign Belgium after the end of war. Thus, the majority of the SPD's parliamentary *Fraktion* formalized the party's ideological polarization on the war issue which would split the labor movement a few months later.

Increasingly pushed toward the radical Left by the unrelentingly nationalist position of the SPD leadership, Bernstein began to assume a pivotal position in the party's growing anti-war faction. As Kautsky put it, Bernstein, who had always supported "civic" or "liberal" forms of nationalism, became the "standard bearer of the internationalist idea in German social democracy."⁵⁹ Between the crucial years of 1915 and 1917, Bernstein's literary output reached unprecedented proportions. Completing political pamphlets and articles on the International Workingmen's Association, foreign policy, Zionism, and nationalism, his writings often failed to elude the iron grip of the imperial censor.⁶⁰ Indeed, he struggled hard with the seemingly impossible task of criticizing the government without disclosing the full thrust of his arguments.

Bernstein's attitude toward Zionism as a national movement also changed significantly during the war years. Although he had always rejected anti-Semitism from an ethically based, humanitarian point of view, he had also disapproved of Zionism as "a kind of intoxication which acts like an epidemic . . . [T]his is reason enough for social democracy to take it seriously and to criticize it from the bottom up."⁶¹ Pressing questions of national self-determination coupled with extreme

⁵⁸ Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kausky, and Hugo Haase, "Das Gebot der Stunde," in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (June 19, 1915).

⁵⁹ Kautsky, "Eduard Bernstein," p. 47.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, *Die Internationale der Arbeiterklasse und der europäische Krieg* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1915); *Sozialdemokratische Völkerpolitik*; and *Von der Aufgabe der Juden im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Reiss, 1917).

⁶¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Der Schulstreit in Palästina," in *NZ* 32.1 (1913/14), p. 752.

displays of anti-Semitism which were raised in the context of the war, led Bernstein to support the concept of national autonomy for Jews in individual European countries, and to consider a “civic” Jewish nationalism as reconcilable with modern democratic ideas of self-determination.⁶² But while he continued to disavow the strongly exclusivist streak running through the Zionist cause, he also argued that the history of European Jewry had made them “born pacifists” and the true mediators among the peoples of the world.⁶³ On this point, he held fast to his earlier idealistic belief that the truest and noblest mission of the Jewish people consisted in working for the universalist goals of peace and international cooperation.

Although he began to cultivate a relationship with the Labor Zionist Movement during the war, it was only in the late 1920s – after his niece, Lily Zadek, had emigrated to Palestine – that Bernstein became openly sympathetic to Zionist settlers in the Middle East, admiring their cooperative social framework and their pioneering zeal.⁶⁴ Joining several Zionist labor organizations, he attempted to use his influence to have pro-Zionist material published in the German social democratic press.⁶⁵ Gradually he gained a favorable reputation among Zionist activists, and was even approached by prominent Jewish leaders like David Ben-Gurion to use his political clout with English politicians to prevent the British Government from suspending Jewish immigration to Palestine.⁶⁶

In 1916, the increasingly chauvinistic and anti-Semitic SPD leadership drew the ultimate consequences of worsening intra-party disputes by expelling Hugo Haase and his “pacifist Jewish Gang” from the parliamentary *Fraktion*. Almost immediately, Haase embarked on the creation of a separate socialist organization – the “Social Democratic Association” – which ultimately led to the founding of a new “Independent” Social Democratic Party (USPD), a curious mix of left-wing revolutionaries, Marxist internationalists, anti-war centrists, and a few ethical socialists. Though he had always supported party unity, Bernstein arrived at a decision he hoped he would never have to make. After agonizing weeks of fruitless mediation efforts, he hesitantly joined the breakaway party. Though opposing a number of revolutionary principles in the USPD platform, he fully agreed with its peace aims and felt that the new party

⁶² See Robert S. Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), p. 72; and Jacobs, *On Socialists and “The Jewish Question” after Marx*, pp. 44–70.

⁶³ Eduard Bernstein, “Vom Patriotismus der Juden,” *Die Friedenswarte* 18 (1916), p. 248; *Von den Aufgaben der Juden im Weltkrieg*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Bernstein A, B10.

⁶⁵ See Jacob, *On Socialists and “The Jewish Question” after Marx*, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Wistrich, *Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky*, p. 74.

offered him a more appropriate political context for propagating his anti-war stance.

In March 1918, Bernstein risked his personal freedom by delivering one of his most memorable speeches in the Reichstag, a sharp rebuke against the government's repugnant war policies that included massive violations of international law, the engagement in an unprecedented series of submarine attacks on civilian vessels, and the unwillingness to consider comprehensive peace proposals.⁶⁷ Repeatedly interrupted and shouted down by nationalist social democrats, Liberals, and Conservative parliamentarians, an unfazed Bernstein calmly finished his denunciation of "official" German war policy. Unfortunately, it would take another eight months and millions of lost lives before the Great War would finally come to an end.

Revolution and early Weimar years

The tumultuous months from November 1918 to February 1919 were a time in which the main political protagonists of the fledgling Weimar Republic struggled in vain to find a way between tradition and privilege, old authoritarianism and new forms of radicalism, reaction and revolution.⁶⁸ With revolutionary workers' and soldiers' councils springing up all over Germany, Bernstein stuck to his vision of evolutionary socialism, presenting to a large public his reformist ideas in favor of a new, truly representative, parliamentary order. For example, in his well-attended lecture "What is Socialism," held in Berlin on December 28, 1918, Bernstein reaffirmed his devotion to liberal democracy, universal suffrage, and democratic forms of economic production as "preconditions" for the extension of the "socialist principle" and the creation of a democratic socialist republic.⁶⁹ True to his principles of free trade and international cooperation, he also announced his support for US President Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations – as long as it was understood that the charter of such an international body formally acknowledged the necessary

⁶⁷ For a brief summary of Bernstein's speech, see Berlau, *The German Social Democratic Party 1914–1921*, pp. 149–150.

⁶⁸ For a history of German social democracy after 1918, see Richard N. Hunt, *German Social Democracy 1918–1933* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964); W. L. Guttman, *The German Social Democratic Party 1875–1933* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); R. Breitman, *German Socialism and Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); and Heinrich August Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik, 1918 bis 1924* (Berlin–Bonn: Dietz Nachf., 1984), and *Der Schein der Normalität. Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik, 1924–1930* (Berlin–Bonn: Dietz Nachf., 1985).

⁶⁹ Eduard Bernstein, "Was ist Sozialismus?," in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, pp. 137–167.

imperative for “the expansion of democracy in all member states, based on the rule of law and national self-determination.”⁷⁰

Using the political clout of his new governmental position as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the First Provisional Weimar Government, Bernstein once again chose the thankless role of mediator, this time urging delegates of the SPD and the USPD to reconcile their differences for the sake of building a united labor movement in the new republic. He spent long hours hammering out a possible socialist “compromise position” only to discover that the warring factions were not yet ready to make peace. When, on January 19, 1919, the newly elected National Assembly met in the Berlin Reichstag for the first time, Bernstein was conspicuously absent. Attempting to set a last symbolic example for socialist reconciliation, he had reapplied for membership in the SPD without giving up his membership in the USPD. Forced to choose between a bureaucratized party of *Praktiker* with nationalist leanings and an increasingly Bolshevik-sounding USPD, Bernstein decided in favor of the SPD. Having set himself the task of helping to establish a politically stable democratic republic, he felt that his period of war-time opposition had come to an end. As a result, he forfeited his secure USPD parliamentary seat and returned to a party whose leaders were less than eager to welcome their harsh wartime critic back.

This short period of absence from political office allowed Bernstein to write and lecture extensively on economic issues, particularly regarding the possible wholesale nationalization of private industry. Wary of radical slogans demanding the “immediate socialization of German industry” and repeatedly pointing to the “chilling Bolshevik experiment,” he warned against council rule and argued that a socialization of production was no panacea but needed to be applied selectively on a case-by-case basis so as not to endanger the necessary recovery of Germany’s national economy. Chapter 9 will discuss Bernstein’s attitude toward Bolshevism in more detail.

Predicting the perseverance of a “mixed economy” for many years to come, Bernstein was convinced that many features of capitalist ownership had to be retained. Emphasizing the perils of “industrial centralization,” he warned against the installation of a powerful state bureaucracy. Over and over again, he pointed to Germany’s dire economic situation and its political and social fragmentation, calling once again for the formation of a broadly based “democratic bloc” linking the SPD and all bourgeois-republican parties – even in the hypothetical case of an absolute majority for the SPD in future elections.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Eduard Bernstein, *Völkerbund oder Staatenbund?* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1919), pp. 23–26.

⁷¹ *ES*, p. 55.

When the Spartakus Uprising occurred in early January 1919, Bernstein was forced to watch the horrible spectacle of thousands of workers clashing with each other on the streets. Seeking close contact with Hugo Haase and other USPD leaders, he pleaded with Ebert and Scheidemann to use their political influence to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. But the hard-nosed strategy of SPD Interior Minister Gustav Noske only exacerbated the situation, for he clearly condoned the terrible acts of violence committed by right-wing paramilitary groups against the “Spartacist criminals.” Within a few days, Noske’s notorious police units – in part comprised of members of the ultra-nationalist *Freikorps* – quelled the insurrection by brute force, including the heinous murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Bernstein’s vehement protests and his disavowal of Noske’s brutal methods found little resonance in an SPD fighting, as Noske saw it, for its very political survival against a “German Bolshevism.”

Exasperated, Bernstein withdrew from the fray and returned to his literary projects, completing a number of important studies within a period of only eighteen months. First, there were his important works on conflict resolution, international law and the League of Nations.⁷² Next, he finished his celebrated historical study of the events surrounding the birth of the Weimar Republic, entitled *The German Revolution: Its Origins, Events and Results*.⁷³ Serving as an impressive model for succeeding historians of the early Weimar period, this book represented the first detailed illustration of the events leading from the German collapse on the Western Front in the late summer of 1918 to the January 1919 Reichstag elections. And lastly, he published *The Essence of Economics and Economic Development*, a popular introduction to socialist economics.⁷⁴

In the Spring semester of 1921, Bernstein accepted a generous offer from the University of Berlin’s Division of Social Science to lead a graduate seminar in political and social theory entitled, “Controversial Issues in Socialism: Past and Present.” Compiled and published in his 1921 book, *Socialism Past and Present*, these lectures forged his liberal-socialist arguments into more coherent formulations than ever before. Bernstein himself recognized that the study best reflected his “mature revisionism,” noting that, “Some chapters only repeat in different form issues and problems that I have presented in previous studies and which are no longer disputed in socialist literature. However, other chapters

⁷² *Völkerrecht und Völkerpolitik, Wesen, Fragen, und Zukunft des Völkerrechts* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1919); *Völkerbund oder Staatenbund?*; and *Der Völkerbund* (Basel: Verlag der National-Zeitung, 1919).

⁷³ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Deutsche Revolution* (Berlin: Gesellschaft & Erziehung, 1921).

⁷⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *Wirtschaftswesen und Wirtschaftswerden: Drei gemeinverständliche Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1920).

distinguish themselves sharply from my early writings through a more coherent conceptual construction and a more definitive formulation of ideas.”⁷⁵

Socialism Past and Present revisits the most significant problems of socialist theory from the 1870s to 1918 – the relationship between Marxism and science, class theory, the philosophy of history, representative democracy, state theory, and the labor theory of value. The book’s underlying theme remained the modification of the old Aristotelian ideal of a “middle way” to the model of evolutionary socialism: the firm insistence on liberal socialist principles designed to avoid the extremes of both metaphysical utopianism and instrumentalist reformism: “Socialists . . . must safeguard against two things: getting lost in utopianism or falling prey to pusillanimity.”⁷⁶

The 1921 Görlitz Party Program

Having achieved governing responsibility in the young German Republic, many SPD leaders felt that the time had come to work out a new party platform which, almost thirty years after the Erfurt Program, would reflect the changed social and political situation of post-war Germany. Even Kautsky conceded: “[T]he [1918–19] revolution has created a completely new situation which has put an entirely different face on our tactical considerations.”⁷⁷ Major criticism of the old program concerned its theoretical portion, written by Kautsky himself, who, as an active member of the USPD, had no part in drafting the new Görlitz Program. Bernstein’s revisionist critique directed at the “unempirical character” of Kautsky’s orthodox Marxist model (which only twenty years before had unsettled the vast majority of the party members) was now not only taken for granted but regarded as a necessary underpinning for any future party program. In 1920, after initiating lengthy debates on the character of its new program, the SPD’s Executive Committee entrusted a newly formed Program Commission with the task of producing a first draft. Dividing this task into twelve subcommissions, each dealing with a specific area, the members of the Program Committee periodically opened their proceedings to regional and local party organizations and other members of the party, inviting their input.

Still resenting Bernstein’s anti-war stance and his “abandonment of the party,” some members of the Executive Committee sought to prevent his election to the Program Committee. Although managing to deny him the

⁷⁵ *ES*, pp. 52–53.

⁷⁶ Bernstein, *Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 144.

⁷⁷ Kautsky, “Karl Kautsky,” in Meiner, *Die Volkswirtschaftslehre*, p. 20.

chairmanship of the committee, his opponents could not prevent him from getting elected. To no one's surprise, Bernstein exerted the most influence on the formulation of the new program's revisionist language. While the final draft of the Görlitz Program still retained a good number of Marxist categories, it nonetheless represented, as *Neue Zeit* editor, Heinrich Cunow, put it, a first step towards "leaving behind the outdated traditions and party formulas . . . and enter[ing] new paths of development."⁷⁸ Most Program Committee members honored Bernstein's experience and seniority, ultimately commissioning him with writing a general, "popular" commentary on the new program. Directed at ordinary party members, his *Commentary on the Görlitz Party Program* ultimately served as the SPD's official introductory pamphlet.⁷⁹

Bernstein lost no time in addressing the difference between the old Erfurt Program and its new version. As anticipated in his 1909 "Guiding Principles for the Theoretical Portion of a Social Democratic Party Program," the "Görlitz Program only refers to actual conditions . . . It does not predict the future but only describes that which has actually come into being."⁸⁰ As expected, Bernstein emphasized the importance of a piecemeal reformism in exerting important social controls on the capitalist system: "The coordinated actions of unionized workers together with the pressure of socialist parties on legislation and public administration increasingly limits the dictatorship of capital."⁸¹ Ultimately, the Görlitz Program reflected the SPD's strong commitment to representative, liberal democracy as the structure of government "irrevocably given by historical development." Bernstein's liberal language of rights, seemingly invoking Lassalle's commitment to the "democratic principle" in socialism, found its way into the program in a striking passage stating that social democracy would consider "every assault on it [the democratic republic] as an attempt on the vital rights of the people."⁸² In this passage, Bernstein explicitly referred to, "The enemies of democracy from the Left who fantasize that a council system according to the Russian model will lead to a dictatorship of the proletariat that will realize a socialist society in the fastest and most reliable way possible."⁸³

In theory, factory councils were defended by Marxist revolutionaries as

⁷⁸ Heinrich Cunow, "Die geschichtliche Bedeutung des Erfurter [sic] Parteitags" *NZ* 40.2 (1921), pp. 25–30.

⁷⁹ Eduard Bernstein, *Das Görlitzer Programm der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (Berlin: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1922).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸² *Görlitz Party Program* in "Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany," in Susanne Miller, *A History of German Social Democracy: From 1848 to the Present*, p. 254.

⁸³ Bernstein, *Das Görlitzer Programm der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, p. 32.

instruments of “direct democracy,” dispensing with a professional bureaucracy and encouraging voters to recall their deputies at any time. However, by 1921, the obvious failure of the most prominent example of a council system – Lenin’s *Soviets* – became painfully apparent. Firmly rejecting a “Russian solution” for Germany, Bernstein and most of his SPD comrades considered the survival of privately owned large-scale industry in post-war Germany as an inevitable precondition for jumpstarting the war-ravaged German economy. Thus, he reacted strongly against USPD radicals and the revolutionary demands of the leaders of the newly founded German Communist Party (KPD), who insisted on decentralized workers’ councils as the sole “authentic” democratic-socialist configuration of political and economic power. The Görlitz Party Program considered such councils merely as transitory caretaker organizations which would provide temporary relief and workers’ solidarity in the chaotic months following the Great War.

Reflecting on the “transition question” almost twenty-five years after the Revisionist Controversy, Bernstein still maintained that immediate socialization of the private enterprise system and the expropriation of industrial and rural property would lead to a general breakdown of economic activity and mass unemployment. Although he acknowledged the importance of the socialization of certain branches of production, Bernstein realistically pointed to the general dependence of the national economy on private enterprises and other forms of profit-making organizations. The council system’s challenge to the strong political organizations of the bourgeoisie and the farmers as well as to the legal framework underlying private property would, in his opinion, eventually lead Germany down the path to a bloody civil war similar to that which had taken place in Russia.⁸⁴

In spite of Bernstein’s leadership, however, the new program still remained somewhat ambiguous in its ideological character. Some passages seemed to encourage social democracy’s slow metamorphosis from an exclusive class party to a comprehensive people’s party, while others clung to the familiar Marxist language. While the Program Committee deliberately sought to maintain the party’s appeal to the industrial working class, it also made barely veiled overtures to the “new middle classes,” reflected in the deletion of militant phrases and the insertion of the terms “working people” and “producing masses” instead of the familiar “proletariat.” The new program also ostensibly underscored the role of trade unions in moving society toward socialism by securing higher wages through collective bargaining and further shortening of the workday.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Praising its alleged commitment to the path of social reform, Bernstein's commentary made the program appear in a much better light. Indeed, he dealt with the systemic limitations to its evolutionary framework only in passing, hardly mentioning that the current economic crisis, together with the onus of Germany's war reparation payments, was severely curtailing the potential for social reforms. While the KPD hailed Germany's economic woes as a welcome sign of the approaching breakdown of the "bourgeois-capitalist" state, mainstream social democrats faced the more difficult task of rebuilding society and constructing a functioning "social market economy."

Unexpectedly, the Görlitz Program turned out to be the shortest-lived party program in the history of the SPD. Only a year later, the anti-Bolshevik faction of the USPD reunited with the SPD, asking the party to commission a new compromise program. Although Bernstein was again invited to join the drafting commission, his influence this time was only modest. Wary of the strong appeal of the KPD and willing to make minor ideological concessions to its new USPD members, the party returned to its pre-war arrangement of "uniting the working class," reluctantly accepting Kautsky's more orthodox-Marxist ideas as the basis of the new 1925 Heidelberg Program. Thus, the SPD continued the old incongruence between Marxist theory and reformist practice which had been successfully perpetuated by the *Praktiker*.

Though confronted with the harsh social and economic realities of Weimar Germany, Bernstein clung to his evolutionary vision of a constructive replacement of parts of the capitalist system with those embodying socialist principles. Had he not learned a painful lesson in the last decade? How could he even dream that SPD *Praktiker* – manifestations of the instrumentalist logic of maximizing votes by catering to the often "unsocialistic" demands of an eclectic mass electorate – would even consider his socialist core principles? Was he not aware of the existence of severe structural constraints to economic reform under Weimar conditions which not only curbed the pace and extent of socialist reformism but might even result in the reversal of previous advances? The last ten years of Bernstein's life, spent within Germany's fragile democratic framework, represent an instructive example of the intrinsic difficulties in linking socialist theory, ethical imperatives, and reformist practice.

9 Bernstein's final battle: confronting socialist instrumentalism

The dynamics of social change in the Weimar Republic: the theory-practice problem revisited

One would think that the moral disaster of the Great War and the fundamentally changed political conditions in post-war Germany gave the German labor movement the perfect opportunity finally to embrace a consequent reformist ideology based on ethical socialist principles. Such an initiative would have allowed social democracy to close the old theory-practice gap that had plagued the movement for the past forty years. In fact, there was no dearth of sophisticated reformist-socialist theories developed by a new generation of capable social democratic intellectuals, including distinguished thinkers like Eduard Heimann, Hermann Heller, Leonard Nelson, Hendrik de Man, Paul Tillich, Emil Lederer, and Fritz Naphtali. Though distinct in their intellectual approaches, their conceptual framework was clearly rooted in the intellectual soil of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism.¹

The harsh political realities of the young Weimar Republic, however, pushed the SPD onto a fundamentally different path. On the surface, of course, social democracy could justifiably claim to have played a crucial role in producing a new democratic constitution that enshrined genuine parliamentarianism and basic political liberties, thus ending long decades of imperial authoritarianism. Yet underneath this freshly painted layer of formal democracy there remained the thick brick wall of the traditional German hierarchical state (*Obrigkeitsstaat*), pervaded by a strongly anti-democratic political culture. The political values and attitudes of many Germans were often at odds with solid republican values, and the traditionalist mentality and patterns of behavior persisted to a high degree even after the war years.

¹ For a brief introduction to the main ideas of these theorists, see Thomas Meyer, "Elemente einer Gesamtheorie des Demokratischen Sozialismus und Hinderung ihrer Durchsetzung in der Weimarer Republik," in Horst Heimann and Thomas Meyer, eds. *Reformsozialismus und Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1982), pp. 413-440.

While the Weimar SPD could present itself as the chief defender of the country's new democratic system, it failed miserably in the necessary task of weakening the powerful influence of the army, state bureaucrats, and large-scale industrialists on German society. Already before the end of the war, Friedrich Ebert, the First Chairman of the Majority Socialists (MSPD), concluded an informal alliance with General Wilhelm Groener, who represented the army and the old ruling elites. The leading industrialist, Hugo Stinnes, and trade-union boss, Carl Legien, proceeded to create the "Central Working Alliance" with the obvious goal of keeping organized labor in its place.² These pacts were designed to provide the new social democratic government with some legitimacy by creating the appearance of the maintenance of "public order" in the critical period preceding the first elections. Many social democrats considered these deals unavoidable, fearing that returning soldiers and mass unemployment might otherwise lead to widespread disorder and a possible Bolshevik-style take-over.

As Hans-Ulrich Wehler notes, the entire "socialist" leadership of the MSPD perceived "the liberating discontinuity of the revolution mainly as a threat."³ With this glaring handicap of failure to carry out a radical reform of the state, its personnel and its institutions, the likelihood that a functioning democratic system would emerge in Germany was extremely low. These powerful continuities at work in German political history were also apparent in the blueprint of the new Weimar Constitution, which reintroduced the old constitutional dualism in the form of a mixed parliamentary-presidential system of rule, thus predisposing the new republic to a spirit of political contentiousness and instability.

Finally, falling short of a comprehensive overhaul of its old theoretical edifice along the lines of a genuine "liberal socialism" that might have breathed new life into its increasingly bureaucratized pragmatism, German social democracy proved itself incapable of generating the necessary emotional drive and mass support for its fragile "socialist republic." The long-overdue 1921 revision of the old Erfurt Party Program had merely amounted to a necessary, but not sufficient, first instalment. In fact, the SPD took a step backward when it replaced the Görlitz Program with the more Marxist 1925 Heidelberg Program.

To be sure, the task of ideological renewal was not an easy undertaking for a German labor movement which in some crucial respects resembled Plato's fabled many-headed creature. Sharing governing responsibility and thus forced to occupy itself with the most immediate problems of the day, the SPD found itself enmeshed in the chronic woes of Germany's

² Wehler, *The German Empire*, pp. 224-225.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

war-torn, sputtering economy. The persisting intra-labor conflicts dramatically worsened after the founding of the Moscow-oriented German Communist Party, and soon an openly anti-democratic, catch-all “people’s party” of the Right began to capture the nationalist resentment of a vanquished nation. Caught between the undemocratic extremism of both the Left and the Right, the party’s theoretical manoeuvrability was additionally curtailed by a public mood identifying parliamentarism with humility and defeat – a phenomenon that retarded the much-needed reorientation of socialist theory. To a large degree, these developments explain why the leaders of the Weimar SPD regarded fundamental theoretical debates as an ill-affordable luxury that, in addition, threatened to expose the political heterogeneity of the German labor movement.

Though the immediate political effects of Bernstein’s post-war contributions to socialist theory were fairly modest, the ageing revisionist remained a vociferous critic of the fatigued Weimar socialism.⁴ His perceptive commentaries on the politics of the SPD centered on the party’s confusing plans regarding the overall direction and pace of social change in Germany. While his previously unsuccessful calls for temporary alliances with various bourgeois parties were finally heeded, the old Left’s resistance against “opportunist” coalitions with the Liberals – like the newly organized German Democratic Party – remained too strong to overcome the old climate of mutual distrust.

However, there was indeed some tactical merit in the arguments of those orthodox voices that warned against the dangers of a wholesale abandonment of Marxist theory. After all, how could the SPD retain both its circumscribed self-image of a working class party and its ideological commitment to end capitalism within a new pluralist framework of competitive interest-group politics? Putting their fingers on the Left’s persisting divergence of theory and practice, Marxist critics could also provide a powerful explanation for the impotence of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism in the face of an increasingly instrumental tendency in the party. Most importantly, they grasped why his pioneering reconceptualization of socialism had become the pragmatic foundation of the cross on which his admirable ethical principles were crucified. Deprived of its teleological guarantees and its emphasis on seeing the capitalist production process replaced by a “liberal” ethic of redistribution, socialism was transformed into a merely regulative idea designed to guide reformist practice toward the uncertain achievement of greater social justice *within* the existing capitalist order. Losing the absoluteness of Marx’s historicist

⁴ See Heinrich August Winkler, “Eduard Bernstein as Critic of Weimar Social Democracy,” in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, pp. 167–183.

objectivism, meant that social democracy was forced to rely upon its leadership's subjectivist "will to socialism" for the implementation of its sociopolitical objectives.

But as the history of the Weimar Republic shows, the reformist logic emerging from Bernstein's discreditation of Marx's metaphysical *telos* did not automatically translate into his ethical socialism; reformism was also perfectly compatible with the instrumental intentions of the party *Praktiker*. In the name of Bernstein's non-metaphysical, "level-headed pragmatism" oriented toward the "daily tasks of the movement," the *Praktiker* continued in their pre-war course, determined to support a process of political decision-making defined solely by political exigency. Without so much as a peremptory nod toward Bernstein's ethical criticism, their one-dimensional critique subordinated the "abstract principles" of political morality to the instrumental concerns of dispensing immediate material benefits to constituencies, thus furthering the SPD's organizational expansion.⁵

The celebrated achievement of representative democracy in Weimar was therefore a double-edged sword: while ushering in an unprecedented era of political freedom in Germany, it also bound social democracy even closer to the electoral concerns of modern political parties operating in competitive environments. Though the rapid socioeconomic changes occurring in the 1920s clearly confirmed Bernstein's early revisionist theses regarding the increasingly stratified and complex social structure of advanced capitalism, the working class represented only a minority of the electorate, its share steadily declining after 1912.⁶ Conversely, members of the "new middle classes" increased their political influence. The only problem was that they hardly conceived of themselves as oppressed members of the industrial proletariat. Caught in the dynamics of social change, the German labor movement faced the strategic dilemma of either maintaining its class appeal by satisfying the needs of its core constituents, or playing to the different interests of a diverse middle class.

What was to be done? One option was a full-scale retreat to a purist Marxist position which would have led to a further fragmentation of the labor movement (Luxemburg). The second option would have demanded the party's assent to Bolshevik insurrectionism based on the conception of "Soviet socialism" (Klara Zetkin, August Thalheimer). The third alternative would have been the party's unambiguous acknowledgment of the *binding character* of a non-Marxist program of democratic socialism for a reformist political practice (Bernstein). No matter which option the SPD would ultimately select, the choice was between remaining a relatively

⁵ See Bronner, "Bernstein and the Logic of Revisionism," in *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 53–75.

⁶ Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, pp. 23–24.

small, homogeneous labor party with great internal cohesion facing perpetual electoral defeats or broadening the party's electoral appeal at the cost of watering down traditional socialist principles, be they Marxist-revolutionary or Bernsteinian-evolutionary. After all, if socialist strategy was reduced to pure electoral tactics, social democracy risked the survival of its very political identity, reflected in its long-term objectives aimed at transforming the existing capitalistic system.

Having long hitched its political practice to the logic of parliamentary democracy, the SPD remained passive, thus trying to play it both ways. As a result, it lost both its principles (the only weapon with which instrumentalism and bureaucratic rigidification could be fought) and its core constituency. This meant that the most formidable challenge facing Weimar social democracy was *not* the stark choice between total revolution and piecemeal reforms, but how to balance the inescapable tactical imperatives with socialist principles. The party's passivity also undermined further the crucial role of theory to serve as the indispensable means of critical self-reflection. Despite the drafting of two new party programs, Weimar social democracy witnessed but few fundamental debates on the continued validity of old meaning structures. Rudolf Hilferding, the SPD's new rising star, had made it abundantly clear that some Marxist categories – including outdated expectations of a general capitalist breakdown – were still very much part of the party's self-understanding, albeit in a clearly ritualized form.⁷ At the same time, even Hilferding realized that the youthful Marxist dreams of the labor movement had given way to the harsh responsibilities of adulthood reflected in the party's mature role as the republic's guardian of democracy and civil rights. Unwilling to bear the risks involved in touching off new theoretical debates, the party leadership tacitly agreed on ignoring social democracy's many conflicting objectives deriving from the fundamental disjuncture between ideological commitment and practical electoral concerns. As a result, a good number of outdated Marxist slogans survived in the Weimar SPD not because they commanded widespread support, but because socialist theory no longer mattered. Suspending the binding force of socialist principles for concrete political practice, the party leadership seemed to be willing to risk drowning in its own short-term-oriented instrumentalism.

Whether it was its conscious unwillingness to act upon any of these options or sheer bureaucratic inertia, the fact remains that the SPD condoned its rudderless drift on the stormy sea of Weimar politics, thus alienating a good number of socialist intellectuals and activists. It quickly

⁷ Rudolf Hilferding in *Protokoll des 1925 Heidelberg Parteitages* (Berlin, 1925), pp. 273–279.

eroded social democracy's remaining ideological appeal even within its own constituency, not to speak of its failure to attract the "new middle classes." The party's lack of conceptual clarity regarding the direction and pace of social change explains its inability to strengthen the foothold of political democracy in Weimar Germany.

Using Bernstein's evolutionary socialism for the liquidation of the theoretical concerns under which an ethical political judgment becomes possible,⁸ the *Praktiker* pursued a myopic course of "muddling through the problems," and remained mired in their characteristic political half-measures, tactical reversals, and ideological ambiguities. Their instrumentalism poured oil onto the propagandistic fires unleashed by Hitler to convince the electorate of the "inherent weakness" of parliamentary democracy. Bernstein himself never agreed with their impoverished notion of socialism as nothing more than a set of discrete reforms decided upon by a self-serving elite of party technocrats. Criticizing the SPD's "disquieting tendency to fall prey to the spirit of routine," he emphasized that the socialist movement was depriving itself of the crucial theoretical framework necessary for a consistent program of constructive reform. Hence, he berated his party's tendency to forsake "larger, far-reaching interests in favor of short-term advantages."⁹ Indeed, Bernstein's frequent calls for a politics of compromise with the bourgeoisie were not predicated simply on achieving the "best possible deal" for the SPD's electoral constituency, but remained wedded to a coherent theoretical edifice – evolutionary socialism – that emphasized the power of ideological and ethical concerns:

The question of political tactics . . . is in the last resort the eternal conflict between the absolute and the relative method, which reveals itself in its countless modifications throughout the history of the human race, in religion and politics, as a constant source of intellectual estrangement. Absolutism is . . . the rejection of compromise, the rigid consideration of questions from a strictly limited point of view, whether they concern the omnipotence of a dynasty, the rule of an oligarchy or the multitude, the interests of different classes, the validity of dogma, or the principles of ethics. But for relativism one might just as well say liberalism, inasmuch as this conception does not denote a party, but the tendency to toleration and mediation, which means, if it is abused, vagueness, eagerness to compromise, and opportunism.¹⁰

Holding fast to his "socialist ideal," Bernstein doggedly defended the critical role of a liberal-socialist theory for an ethical-reformist practice.

⁸ See Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 66.

⁹ Bernstein cited in Winkler, "Eduard Bernstein as Critic of Weimar Social Democracy," in Fletcher, *From Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 176.

¹⁰ Bernstein, *My Years of Exile*, p. 273.

Regarding the question of the relationship of theory to practice, we frequently encounter very pessimistic opinions. We often hear that practical behavior is determined by interests, passions, and material circumstances. Moreover, there are voices that consider the influence of theory on matters of practical politics and social life to be infinitely small. I strongly disagree . . . [The influence of theory] is especially strong in social classes which find themselves on the political ascent.¹¹

Blanquist Marxism come true: Bernstein's critique of Bolshevism

The surprisingly successful 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the trauma of the 1918–19 German Revolution prompted Bernstein to flesh out in greater detail his earlier critique of the dangers of a mechanistic interpretation of Marxist socialism. In particular, he pointed to the connection between some arguments of the early Marx and the insurrectionist voluntarism of the Bolsheviks.¹² Bernstein's meticulous research underlying his study of the 1848 French revolution undertaken in 1895–96, and his ensuing disapproval of "Blanquist methods," played a significant role in his negative assessment of Bolshevism.¹³ Already in *The Preconditions of Socialism*, he had criticized the "speculative element" in Marx's theory which, in his opinion, had attempted to combine two incompatible intellectual streams. One was "constructive," closely identified with concrete proposals for reform, like the British "Ten Hour Bill"; the other, originating in Auguste Blanqui's deification of revolutionary violence and brute force and picked up by the young Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, Bernstein labeled as "destructive" and "demagogic."¹⁴

Underlying these two models of social change, Bernstein argued, were two entirely opposed patterns of socioeconomic development: the former was peacefully evolutionary, well suited for the modern conditions of advanced capitalism; the latter reflected a conspiratorial-revolutionary strategy which, starting with the Jacobin "reign of terror," had found its expression in leftist manifestations of "dogmatic absolutism." Violence and the Blanquist belief in quick revolutionary fixes were the basic elements of a romantic gospel of force based on metaphysical ideas of human perfection. By contrast, Bernstein viewed the evolutionary path as intrinsically connected with the skeptical pragmatism of scientific research, intellectual openness, and ethical liberalism. In a letter to the

¹¹ Bernstein, *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 75.

¹² Eduard Bernstein, *Wie eine Revolution zugrunde ging* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1921).

¹³ Eduard Bernstein, "Mit einem Nachtrag: Vom Zweiten Kaiserreich bis zur Dritten Republik," in Louis Heritier, *Geschichte der französischen Revolution von 1848 und der Zweiten Republik in volkstümlicher Darstellung*, edited by E. Bernstein and W. Eichhoff (Stuttgart, 1897).

¹⁴ PS, pp. 36–46.

Italian socialist Antonio Labriola, he underscored this point: "If one understands Marxism as a gospel, a ready-made edifice that cannot be changed by new empirical evidence, then I am indeed one of the first socialists bent on destroying it."¹⁵ While Bernstein argued that Marx's later writings clearly attempted to approach the principles of a "free, open science,"¹⁶ he also insisted that the founders had never completely freed themselves from the Blanquist point of view which grossly overestimated "the creative power of revolutionary force for the socialist transformation of modern society."¹⁷ Consequently, by emphasizing the revolutionary Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, the Bolsheviks could actually claim some Marxist legitimacy for their project, for, in Bernstein's opinion, "Marx had a Bolshevik streak in him."¹⁸

Together with his reclaimed friend Kautsky, Bernstein emerged as one of the most cogent early critics of Bolshevism, expressing sentiments at the time widely shared among German social democrats. Indeed, his devastating critique of Bolshevism appears almost prophetic:

The question of Bolshevism is for the German Revolution a question of life and death. The Bolsheviks are the true counter-revolutionaries in Europe; they will kill the socialist revolution. Their interpretation of Marxist theories on the dictatorship of the proletariat is absolutely false. They have known only how to create an army commanded by the officers of the Tsar and intended to combat the will of the people. Their rule is the rule of corruption . . . Germany had experience with it. Bolshevism leads directly to the decadence of humanity.¹⁹

Bernstein defined Marxism-Leninism as the "attempt to apply early Marxist formulas mechanistically to an underdeveloped society, thus violating Marxism's mature, organic conception."²⁰ In other words, he charged Lenin and his comrades with neglecting empirical economic conditions in their "simplistic realization of Marxist teachings under un-Marxist social conditions."²¹ For Bernstein, Bolsheviks employed two faulty strategies to legitimize their interpretation of Marxism: "First, they fall back on *The Communist Manifesto* whose terse phrases date back to an early period in which Marx and Engels enjoyed shocking the bourgeoisie.

¹⁵ Bernstein to Labriola, n.d., *Bernstein A*, C20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *PS*, p. 41.

¹⁸ Bernstein cited in Hook, "Introduction," in *Evolutionary Socialism*, p. xvi.

¹⁹ Eduard Bernstein cited in Merle Fainsod, *International Socialism and the World War* (New York: Octagon, 1973), p. 198.

²⁰ Eduard Bernstein, "Die mechanistische und organische Idee der Revolutionsgewalt," n.d., *Bernstein A*, G55.

²¹ Eduard Bernstein, "Vorwort," in Noe Zhordaniya, *Marxismus und Demokratie* (Berlin: Verlag Gesellschaft & Erziehung, 1921), p. 11. For Kautsky's arguments against Marxism-Leninism, see Karl Kautsky, *Kautsky gegen Lenin*, edited by Peter Lübke (Berlin: Dietz, 1981).

Second, Bolshevism distorts Marx's later works by indulging in a vulgar and crude reading.²² Rather than sticking with the "spirit and principles of [evolutionary] Marxism," the Bolsheviks were, in Bernstein's opinion, in the process of establishing,

[A]n oppressive regime which mocks civilized cultural development. Preaching the gospel of brutal force, they have embarked on a contradictory, botched economic experiment, thus smothering the necessary productive impulses that form the preconditions for lifting the people's living standard. Indeed, the Bolsheviks have clearly gone backward.²³

Although he must have known that even some passages of Marx's later writings – like his famous line in volume I of *Capital* referring to "force" as the "midwife of every old society pregnant with the new one"²⁴ – were well suited for a Bolshevik interpretation of socialism, Bernstein presented the "real Marx" as the Darwinian evolutionist who, after all, had declared that "current society is not a solid crystal, but a changing and constantly transforming organism."²⁵ Shrewdly using Marx for the legitimization of his own evolutionary socialism, Bernstein proceeded to anchor Bolshevism in the Russian historical context of socialist anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin and Sergei Nechaiev, whose irrationalism and voluntarism seemed to conflict with the "rational socialism" of Marx and Engels.²⁶

At the 1919 International Berne Conference of Labor, Bernstein raised strong objections to identifying or equating Bolshevism with "democratic socialism." Unwilling to hold back on this issue, his speech at the conference turned into a early indictment of the political terror of the Bolshevik regime:

The Bolshevik government was the first socialist regime that had peacefully demonstrating workers shot down with machine guns. The Bolshevik government was the first to simply lock up socialists of other persuasions – Socialists who are not putschists, but who were robbed of their rights outside the law and in breach of the law, repeating in all this things previously done by reactionary governments. In Russia Socialists, comrades who were at many international congresses and who have fought for socialism all their lives, are locked up and robbed of their rights. . . . We need only to read the Bolsheviks' own reports, we need only to read their government's own statistics on the state of finances and social life as a whole, to see

²² Bernstein, "Die bolschewistische Abart des Sozialismus," in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 117.

²³ Bernstein, "Vorwort," in Zhordaniya, *Marxismus und Demokratie*, p. 11. See also, Eduard Bernstein, "Bolshevism," n.d., *Bernstein A*, A36a.

²⁴ *C I*, p. 751.

²⁵ *MEW* 23, pp. 15–16.

²⁶ Bernstein, "Die bolschewistische Abart des Sozialismus," in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, pp. 113–125.

that a rotten, fraudulent system is at the helm, a system that compromises itself further by trying, after having bankrupted its own country, to pull other countries into this bankruptcy.²⁷

Two years later, Bernstein wrote the "The Bolshevik Brand of Socialism," an essay that represents his most coherent attempt to discredit Marxism-Leninism by contrasting it with selected passages that showed strong "evolutionary" inclinations in the political thought of Marx. Critically unpacking some crucial passages from the writings of Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and other leading Bolsheviks, he argued that their instrumental understanding of the socialist transformation culminating in the "revolutionary seizure of political power" failed to translate into a socioeconomic framework that reflected ethical socialist principles. In particular, Bernstein resented Trotsky and Bukharin's "idiotic" and "dangerous" methods of "socialist education." Convinced that the revolutionary end justified their ethically questionable means, the Bolshevik leaders frequently familiarized uneducated Russian workers with a version of "revolutionary Marxist socialism" replete with "simplistic deductions and riddled with odd assertions regarding the causes and the lasting consequences of the World War."²⁸ Repeatedly, Bernstein warned that coercive measures and the imposition of a subjectivist "will to communism" on history would ultimately fail because Lenin's Russia lacked the necessary political and economic preconditions for a democratic transition to social democracy.

Shuddering at the amount of human suffering involved in the Bolshevik experiment, Bernstein expressed his solidarity with ordinary Russians, "who already had to pay the price with the wanton sacrifice of countless victims."²⁹ Indeed, Bernstein's final rejection of Marxist-Leninist instrumentalism was based on a remarkable combination of economic considerations and ethical conviction. In Kantian fashion, he refused to sacrifice his moral principles to a Bolshevik socialism of "fantastic social plans and speculative goals," insisting that: "Above all, even for the socialist reformer or revolutionary, there is a categorical imperative!"³⁰ By violating basic human rights, Lenin's political scheme had actually continued the "old Russian tradition of Czarist despotism," for his political methods, too, relied on the "unbridled terror of suppressing and silencing dissent, a method commonly employed by Asian despots and African

²⁷ Bernstein cited in John Riddell, ed. *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power. Documents: 1918-1919* (New York: Pathfinder, 1986), pp. 425-426.

²⁸ Bernstein, "Die bolschewistische Abart des Sozialismus," in *Der Sozialismus Einst und Jetzt*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 121.

sultans.”³¹ Thus, Bernstein’s harsh final judgment on Soviet communism: “Bolshevism is the prime example of the baneful effects of an erroneous theory, manifested as belief in the omnipotence of brute force, blindness to fundamental social laws, and disregard for the evolutionary principle guiding human beings from barbarism to civilization.”³²

But Bernstein’s opposition to Marxism-Leninism was not confined to debunking its flawed theoretical and moral foundations. In what might be considered a masterpiece of investigative journalism, Bernstein – who as Under-Secretary of the Treasury had had access to top-secret war documents of the Imperial German government – unravelled the hidden skein of German monetary support for the Russian Bolshevik party. In 1921, he published two short articles in *Vorwärts* on this subject, reporting that Lenin and his comrades had received vast sums of money from the Kaiser’s government for their destructive agitation.³³ Though he could not pin down the exact amounts involved or the full extent of the interactions between Lenin and German government officials, Bernstein was able to provide sufficiently specific details to make his reports credible:

From absolutely reliable sources I have now ascertained that the sum was large, certainly more than fifty million Gold marks, a sum about the source of which Lenin and his comrades could be in no doubt. One result of all this was the Brest-Litowsk Treaty. General Hoffmann, who negotiated with Trotsky and other members of the Bolshevik delegation in Brest, held the Bolsheviks in his hands in two senses, and he made sure they felt it.³⁴

Bernstein openly challenged the German Communists and the Russian Bolsheviks to take him to court if they thought he had libeled Lenin. Predictably, however, the Central Committees of both parties maintained their silence, virtually confirming Bernstein’s assertions.³⁵

In addition, Bernstein used his regained SPD seat in the Reichstag to denounce Bolshevism publicly and its “German sister party.” Pointing to persistent and massive human rights violations committed by the Red Army, which included mass executions without fair trial, he barked angrily at his radical comrades on the Left: “Would you suggest we imitate such policies in Germany?”³⁶ When the Red Army marched into Georgia in 1921, Bernstein drafted the SPD’s official protest resolution demanding the retreat of the Bolshevik troops and the release of Georgian social

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³³ Eduard Bernstein, “Ein dunkles Kapitel,” in *Vorwärts* (January 11, 1921).

³⁴ Bernstein cited in Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 122–123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁶ Bernstein cited in *EB*, p. 176.

democratic prisoners.³⁷ The annexation of Georgia, together with the Bolshevik misuse of funds provided by the USPD and SPD for the catastrophic Russian famines in the summer of 1921, further contributed to the increasing disillusion of German socialists with Lenin's authoritarian regime.

In spite of his relentless opposition to Bolshevism, however, Bernstein did not support the ugly Communist-baiting of his comrades Scheidemann and Ebert.³⁸ Indiscriminately labeling all left-wing social democrats who disagreed with them "sympathizers of Bolshevism," the two men reiterated throughout the early Weimar period that they hated all "unpatriotic social revolutionaries like sin."³⁹ Bernstein's criticism of their persisting nationalist agenda remained equally harsh, reaching its highest pitch during the hotly debated question of Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War.

Fighting the socialist right on the issue of German war guilt

Nothing could gauge the full extent of the German labor movement's instrumentalism more accurately than the SPD's calculated decision to participate in the right-wing cynical manipulation of the nationalist resentments of a vanquished nation for mostly electoral reasons. Weimar social democratic leaders bore some responsibility for the lingering "German Question" by doing little to debunk grotesque nationalist myths like the so-called "encirclement theory" – because it resonated with a large segment of the population. This effective piece of propaganda originated with the Imperial Government's early efforts to convince ordinary Germans that they had fallen prey to a well-organized international conspiracy initiated by France and Britain long before 1914.

Few prominent social democrats possessed Bernstein's ethical commitment or the intellectual honesty it took to denounce the hollowness of such distorted slogans. Immediately after the war, he published a short, but passionate monograph warning against the pervasiveness and resiliency of the nationalist lies that had obscured the true origins of the hostilities. Moreover, he sought to expose and embarrass the right-wing chauvinists who were responsible for spreading the *Dolchstoßlegende* – another highly

³⁷ See Jürgen Zarusky, *Die deutschen Sozialdemokraten und das sowjetische Modell: Ideologische Auseinandersetzungen und aussenpolitische Konzeptionen 1917–1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992), p. 139.

³⁸ Eduard Bernstein, *Was ist der Marxismus: Eine Antwort auf eine Hetze* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1924).

³⁹ Scheidemann and Ebert cited in William H. Maehl, *German Militarism and Socialism* (Lincoln: Nebraska Wesleyan Press, 1968), p. 180.

effective myth which claimed that defeatist social democratic politicians had “stabbed the ‘victorious’ German troops in the back” by secretly initiating premature peace negotiations with the *Entente* Powers.⁴⁰

Now that the party had access to the voluminous state archives which proved beyond a doubt that the main responsibility for the outbreak of the war lay with the German Imperial Government, Bernstein admonished the SPD to set the historical war record straight by indicting the war policies of the Kaiser as well as admitting its own mistakes – like issuing his tragic votes for the war credits. As Heinrich August Winkler has pointed out, though Bernstein’s challenge to the party was clearly morally based, he also pursued a political purpose by arguing that coming clean on the war issue would give the SPD greater political credibility.⁴¹ After all, if social democrats charged the Imperial Government with the responsibility for the war while also openly regretting the extent of their own involvement, they might invite a greater degree of international solidarity with a defeated Germany, at the same time making it more difficult for the old elites to return to key positions of political and social power. As Bernstein argued, the way to a clean break with Germany’s authoritarian past lay in the social democrats’ ability to drag the war-guilt issue out of the dangerous historical twilight providing the nationalist parties an ideal hiding place from which to assail the “Marxist traitors” for their alleged failures.

Not surprisingly, Bernstein’s rather persuasive strategy of consistently disclosing the negative role of the Imperial Government struck most of his *Praktiker* comrades as a sure-fire way to lose electoral support from large segments of a German population which clearly found comfort in the chauvinistic belief that Germany bore no war guilt, and believed that the severe conditions of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles had punished a whole nation unjustly. Moreover, the party pragmatists feared that the explosive mixture of admitting Germany’s war guilt and leveling profound self-criticism would legitimize the Allies’ reparation demands and therefore further exacerbate right-wing attacks on the young republic.

Remaining true to his ethical principles, Bernstein continued to denounce those “phoney socialists” who lacked either the backbone or the conviction to finally come to terms with recent German history. In particular, their opportunistic tactics, geared to manipulate the public outrage aroused by the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty, gave Bernstein a golden opportunity to contest his party’s shameless abandonment of its moral duty. Announcing that “the guilt for the outbreak of the

⁴⁰ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Wahrheit über die Einkreisung Deutschlands: Dem deutschen Volke dargelegt* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, 1919).

⁴¹ Winkler, “Eduard Bernstein as Critic of Weimar Social Democracy,” in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 178.

war lies with the German Imperial Government,"⁴² and accepting the high reparation payments as "unavoidable necessities," he continued to deliver his courageous speech at the 1919 SPD Congress despite the shouted anti-Semitic slurs and hostile boos of the party delegates. Bernstein chose to direct his final passionate appeal at the party membership, demanding that "we finally rid ourselves of the bourgeois code of honor; only the truth, nothing but the whole truth can help us."⁴³ Prominent delegates reacted with ridicule, labeling Bernstein's appeals as the "talmudic methods" of a man suffering from a misguided "passion for truth."⁴⁴

The 1919 Party Conference served as the pathetic context for the shallowness of social democratic principles created by the SPD's general disregard for socialist theory and ethical principles. Gustav Hoch, the sole delegate who spoke in Bernstein's defense, issued a prophetic warning, saying that if the party did not follow Bernstein's advice urging it to draw clear lines of demarcation between socialist principles and the propaganda of the nationalist forces, it would eventually be devoured by the ominous consequences of its own opportunistic strategy.⁴⁵ The Weimar party leadership around Ebert, Scheidemann, and Adolf Braun nonetheless turned a deaf ear to the "dumb and destructive" pronouncements of "supermoralists" with "a bee in their bonnets of truth."⁴⁶ Resenting him for needlessly obstructing the "concrete political goals" of the party, the *Praktiker* ridiculed Bernstein's continued attacks against what they considered to be their "reasonable tactics" of moderation *vis-à-vis* the aggressive strategy of radical right-wing forces. For Scheidemann, Bernstein had lost all his political acumen and lowered himself to playing the moralist "devil's advocate," who, in his "exaggerated sense of justice," ended up legitimating the war gains of "Germany's enemies."⁴⁷ Declaring that he had nothing more to add to this issue, Scheidemann indicated that he and the party leadership felt they could ill afford to alienate potential voters by accepting high-sounding ethical arguments equating the "vast misery" of post-war Germany with the "small amount of suffering" inflicted by German troops on Belgium and France.

Given the widespread nationalist sentiments in Germany and seen from a purely instrumental point of view, it was indeed difficult to evaluate what

⁴² Bernstein cited in Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky*, p. 387.

⁴³ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten in Weimar vom 10 bis 15 Juni 1919*, pp. 242–247.

⁴⁴ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung*, p. 213.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Winkler, "Eduard Bernstein as Critic of Weimar Social Democracy," in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung*, p. 213.

the likely domestic political consequences would have been had the party decided to follow Bernstein's advice. However, the socialist tradition had always prided itself on never fully surrendering its fundamental principles to instrumentalism. While Bernstein conceded that the "distinction between principle and tactics can never be absolute," he also insisted that "theory should guide tactics and not the other way around."⁴⁸ For example, in the context of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, the Eisenacher party leadership had proven in a dramatic way that theory – at the time understood as the principles of Marxist internationalism – could indeed outweigh instrumental concerns. Fifty years later, the SPD's Executive Committee skillfully used theory in order to justify their unwillingness to act on principle. The 1922 reunification of the SPD and USPD provided the *Praktiker* with an excellent opportunity to bury the question of German war guilt under meaningless Marxist phrases that blamed the outbreak of the war on "capitalism and the class rule of proprietors."⁴⁹

Bernstein flatly denied this thesis, arguing that such general concepts covered up important aspects of German political evolution – "a history of the struggle of democratic forces against the hegemony of militarists, traditionally cultivated in the upper-class circles of the Empire."⁵⁰ Even Kautsky strongly objected to his party's opportunist tactic of simply using the term "capitalism" as a blanket justification for remaining silent on the role of the real war criminals in the Kaiser's government and General Staff. Moreover, the party's instrumentalist return to some Marxist slogans in order to satisfy its new brethren from the dissolved USPD gave the rising nationalist forces fresh ammunition for their propaganda campaign aimed at persuading the new middle classes that the reunified SPD remained hopelessly wedded to its old Marxist dogmas and was thus incapable of transforming itself into a more inclusive "German people's party."

Predictably, the 1924 general election dealt the SPD a severe setback, while nationalist parties gained ground. In the end, the party's opportunism on the question of war guilt, combined with its tactical ideological reversals, turned out to be just as risky as Bernstein's ethical approach. The strategic and moral weaknesses exhibited by Weimar social democracy further encouraged the parties of the extreme Right to step up their all-out ideological campaign against the despised "Republic of Jews and Socialists."

⁴⁸ Eduard Bernstein, "Zum Reformismus," in *SM* 12 (1908), p. 1,400; and Bernstein, "Ein Vorwort zur Programmrevision," p. 24.

⁴⁹ Winkler, "Eduard Bernstein as Critic of Weimar Social Democracy," in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 180.

⁵⁰ Eduard Bernstein, "Well-Meaning American on the Wrong Way" (August 20, 1926), in *Bernstein A*, A3.

Last years

Despite his dwindling popularity with the party leadership, Bernstein was re-elected as a Berlin representative to the Reichstag from 1920 to 1928. As in his earlier parliamentary tenure, he dedicated most of his energy to matters of taxation and foreign affairs. While he kept his regular routine of juggling his political activities and his busy journalistic schedule, his personal life took a turn for the worse. Feeling very lonely after the death of his wife in 1923, he sought to intensify his contact with relatives. He began a correspondence with his younger brother and spent some time with his nephew, Walther, who had spent most of the war in Russian captivity. The one bright spot of this period was marked by his resumed friendship with Karl Kautsky, his “*dear confrater strenuus in marxismo*,” as Bernstein wrote in his dedication to Kautsky's copy of the *Görlitz Programm*.

In 1924, drawing on the rich symbolism of Bernstein's and Kautsky's long relationship, the party arranged a memorable banquet celebrating both the sixtieth anniversary of the first International Workingmen's Association and Kautsky's seventieth birthday. Selected to give the main speech, Bernstein eloquently recounted the ups and downs of their remarkable relationship. He closed his speech with honest words of affection directed at Kautsky, and the two “old men” of German social democracy engaged in a long, emotional embrace – providing all those present with a moving image of fleeting socialist unity. Six years later, Kautsky repaid the goodwill of his friend by writing an essay in honor of Bernstein's eightieth birthday. The days of battle, though not forgotten, were long forgiven, allowing the emergence of Kautsky's fine sense of humor: “In political matters we have been Siamese twins since 1880. Even such persons quarrel occasionally.”⁵¹

Bernstein remained active until his death, dedicating long hours to furthering the cause of his beloved labor movement, yet not shying away from criticizing the theoretical vacuum maintained by still another new generation of *Praktiker*. The SPD's central offices concentrated on organizing electoral campaigns and attending to administrative matters, leaving a remarkable group of young socialist intellectuals in greater isolation than ever before, and often driving them into the ranks of the KPD. It was both Bernstein's blessing and curse to live long enough to see the dark side of reformist socialism: its bureaucratization, the rule of elites, and an instrumentalist logic slowly gnawing away at the theoretical concerns of his ethical vision. Speaking of the “harmful consequences of the SPD's neglect of political education” and the fact that “socialist

⁵¹ Kautsky cited in Korsch, “The Passing of Marxian Orthodoxy: Bernstein-Kautsky –Luxemburg-Lenin,” in Kellner, *Revolutionary Theory*, p. 179.

theory” had become “completely alien to many [party members],”⁵² Bernstein’s Cassandra calls went, once again, unheeded. Sharing the woes of age with the few remaining “old veterans” of the early days, Bernstein complained about the “arrogance” of party bureaucrats and the “cowardice of the German democratic forces” which had lost “the great idea of internationalism” and caved in to the ethnonationalists’ demagogery of “national honor and dignity.”⁵³ These disheartening experiences drove Bernstein into periods of deep depression, during which he lamented his “political death.”⁵⁴

In the end, however, even the blows of party instrumentalism proved to be unable to destroy his fading efforts at bringing theory back into the SPD. Although the major party publications – including Rudolf Hilferding’s *Gesellschaft* and Friedrich Stampfer’s *Vorwärts* – refused to print most of his articles, Bernstein never ceased writing. Defying the entire party press, the septuagenarian took it upon himself to initiate an elaborate correspondence with old friends and supporters, aimed at securing the funds for a new socialist periodical. Though the enterprise never got off the ground, Bernstein genuinely enjoyed renewing old contacts with progressive journalists and editors.

Having voluntarily resigned from his Reichstag mandate at age seventy-eight in order to “make room for youth,” Bernstein also proved that he would never give up on the labor movement, no matter how harshly he was treated. Seeking to remain in some form “useful to the cause,”⁵⁵ he was a coveted speaker at local party gatherings, usually entertaining his audience with his personal reminiscences. In spite of his debilitating arthritis, he served on the 1928 SPD Commission to investigate the soundness of the party’s military and defense policy proposals. In the end, Bernstein suggested formulating socialist demands in favor of the democratization of the German army, but he voted against radical socialist calls for the abolition of the German armed forces.⁵⁶

His last literary project summed up a lifetime of service for social justice. Together with Kautsky, who had returned to his native Vienna, Bernstein drew up a document warning against the danger of political extremism, accusing the KPD of maintaining “secret threads between Hitler’s NSDAP and Stalin’s CPSU.”⁵⁷ Entitled “The Task of the Hour,” the

⁵² Bernstein cited in Fletcher, “The Life and Work of Eduard Bernstein,” in *From Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 52.

⁵³ Bernstein to Eckstein (November 19, 1925), *Bernstein A*, C14; and Bernstein, “Wer regiert heute Europa?” (February 16, 1923), *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Bernstein to Kautsky (November 9, 1927), *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, DV 543.

⁵⁵ Bernstein to Kautsky (September 13/October 7, 1929), *Kautsky Archive*, IISH, DV556.

⁵⁶ Winkler, *Der Schein der Normalität*, pp. 629–630.

⁵⁷ Eduard Bernstein, “Deutschnationale und Bolshevisten” in (1928), *Bernstein A*, A25.

unpublished document contained Bernstein's optimistic political credo: "In today's stormy political conditions, the German Social Democratic Party is the only firm fortress that can withstand the charge of the masses who are being misled by both the extreme Right and radical Left."⁵⁸ In public, Bernstein refused to let the ominous signs of a new right-wing barbarism interfere with his incorrigible optimism. In private discussions, however, he vented his fear of a possible takeover by Hitler's nationalist forces.⁵⁹ Keeping up with political developments until the end, Eduard Bernstein died of heart failure on December 18, 1932. His funeral was attended by thousands who turned the occasion into one of the last mass demonstrations against a burgeoning National Socialism whose poisonous message would prove fatal to the young republic. *Vorwärts* editor-in-chief Friedrich Stampfer and Reichstag president Paul Löbe delivered eloquent eulogies for a comrade who, mercifully, had been spared from seeing his worst fears become reality.

On January 30, 1933, only six weeks after Bernstein's death, Adolf Hitler became the new Reichskanzler and, a few months later, proceeded to end the ill-fated German experiment in representative democracy. But even the thirteen years of Hitler's *Gewaltherrschaft* could not destroy the ethical vision of a free and egalitarian German society which lay at the very heart of Eduard Bernstein's quest for evolutionary socialism: "Dedication to the Common Good! This is the eternal foundation of morality."⁶⁰

Conclusion

The various academic assessments of Bernstein's contribution to socialist theory range from enthusiastic pronouncements that his approach "has won on all fronts,"⁶¹ to less flattering attributes that describe his political thought as fatally flawed and "inchoate."⁶² This study has argued that the truth lies somewhere in between. Both the greatest strength and the most obvious weakness in Bernstein's revisionism was the unshakable evolutionary optimism that helped him identify the vital connections between socialism and liberalism, ethics and politics, and democracy and social reform. At the same time, his evolutionism also led to the glaring shortcomings of his linear notion of political and ethical progress in the West.

⁵⁸ Bernstein cited in Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky*, p. 393.

⁵⁹ Winkler, *Der Schein der Normalität*, p. 630.

⁶⁰ Bernstein frequently described socialism using this quotation from Heraclitus. See, for example, Eduard Bernstein, "Was ist Sozialismus?," in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 157.

⁶¹ Carlo Schmid cited in *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶² Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire*, pp. 165, 183–188.

Although he clearly recognized that the development of a genuinely liberal socialism called for major revisions, and even the abandonment, of major portions of Marx's theory, the rationalist spirit of the old master continued to hover over Bernstein's pen. Marxism and the universalist discourse of the Enlightenment were the significant intellectual forces dominating his conceptual landscape. Even though he wrote against the "dogmatism of scientific socialism," he often felt forced to justify his critical intervention by showing that an "evolutionary-liberal" interpretation of Marxist socialism might be employed against its doctrinal cousin. But in the end, Marx's and Engels' theoretical influence on him turned out to be a mixed blessing at best, for it prevented Bernstein from formulating an unambiguous repudiation of the Marxist *Weltanschauung*.

This is not to say that any serious socialist thinker can afford to overlook Marx's lasting insights. However, the evolutionary optimism driving Bernstein's liberal-socialist vision at times sounded just as deterministic and dogmatic as Marx's socialism. Convinced that modernity was "inexorably" moving toward increasing social complexity and nobler forms of "socialist culture," Bernstein clung to a liberal-Victorian conceptual universe which retarded his realization that the mode of political compromise and reformist gradualism could easily degenerate into a political instrumentalism that might reverse previous social gains and strengthen new forms of authoritarianism. Consequently, as Stephen Eric Bronner has pointed out, there remain major theoretical inconsistencies in Bernstein's assumption that the cumulative impact of a steady reformism would eventually produce a systemic transformation of capitalist society.⁶³ Yet, it is equally important to acknowledge that, by reinserting moral subjectivity and human agency into socialist theory, Bernstein at least took the important first steps toward the necessary process of disentangling the socialist tradition from the ideological grip of the founders of scientific socialism.

Though his talent for historical interpretation made minor classics of works like *Ferdinand Lassalle As a Social Reformer*, and *Cromwell and Communism*, Bernstein was hardly in the same league with academic historians like Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Meinecke, or Oswald Spengler. The same can be said of his philosophical contribution, which certainly exhibits the author's firm grasp of general theoretical problems, but nonetheless lacks the polished features and in-depth understanding of academically trained socialist philosophers like Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, Jean Jaurès, or Max Adler. To be fair, however, it must be emphasized that Bernstein never laid claim to advancing path-breaking philosophical

⁶³ Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 73.

theses. Rather, he approached political and social philosophy with the caution of an experienced social observer who knows that theoretical analysis captures only a fraction of real-life complexity. His enormous range of intellectual interests provided the necessary foundation for his astute commentaries on the ethical implications of public policy decisions.

As a commentator on current political affairs, Bernstein takes his place as the genuine successor of Friedrich Engels who, as J. D. Hunley has recently pointed out, also possessed a vast knowledge of "such a diversity of disciplines as science, philosophy, history, anthropology, languages, economics, current events, and business matters . . . without falling into the pit of dilettantism."⁶⁴ Eminently successful in his career as a political journalist, Bernstein's numerous articles appeared not only in socialist publications, but were frequently picked up by the bourgeois press or given prominent space in first-rate social-science journals like Max Weber's *Archives for Social Science*. Bernstein possessed an intuitive grasp of emerging sociopolitical trends and rendered his political judgment in a language that was free of the partisan prejudice of many of his Marxist comrades.

It is in the field of political science – spanning from political theory to political economy; from international relations to comparative politics; and from public policy to political sociology – that Bernstein can truly lay claim to distinction. While holding fast to the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment and stressing the liberal tenets of individual responsibility and ethical engagement, Bernstein's new socialist vision was informed by *real* social interdependence rather than by Hegel's speculative totality.

Evolutionary socialism aimed, first and foremost, at developing an empirically informed, normative foundation for the realization of concrete socialist demands. Bernstein's self-critical political discourse sought to leave the necessary space for serious debates with political opponents, while at the same time retaining the ethical ideals that comprise the basis of a liberal-egalitarian vision of society. Indeed, such attempts to marry the "demon of politics" with the "god of love" (Weber) never fully escape the eternal conflict between the expediency of the political moralist and the conviction of the moral politician, so well described in Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*.⁶⁵ At the same time, a theory of ethical socialism refuses habitually to subordinate theoretical concerns to instrumental considerations, be it in the name of "rationality," "realism," or "national self-interest." Taking into consideration *both* the material and ideal interests of disadvantaged groups in society, Bernstein's evolutionary

⁶⁴ J. D. Hunley, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), p. 46.

⁶⁵ Kant, *Political Writings*, pp. 121–125.

socialism insisted on a synchronization of means and ends, of moral integrity and political objectives.

For Bernstein, the ultimate task of the socialist thinker was the seemingly impossible duty of nursing the steady flame of theory and political morality without either allowing it to turn into an all-consuming bushfire of sectarian purity or letting it be extinguished by the cold breath of unprincipled instrumentalism. Hence, he neither shied away from the onerous obligation of the socialist intellectual to both “*explain* the movement and *show* the way,” nor did he fall into the philosophical *hubris* of maintaining that correct theory alone can create or destroy a political movement.⁶⁶ Indeed, Bernstein maintained that the concerns of the socialist intellectual could not be divorced from matters of practice understood as *Kleinarbeit*: they entailed not only the scientific investigation of empirical tendencies, but, most importantly, the organization and education of the public, and the continuous solving of concrete problems on the path toward a more libertarian and egalitarian society.⁶⁷ Thus, he insisted that socialist theorists maintain the open attitude of the social scientist who sought to understand (*verstehen* in the Weberian sense) his sociohistorical context. Without preserving the detached posture of a “value-free” inquiry into social reality, Bernstein argued, social democracy as a political movement deprived itself of examining the shifting tendencies, possibilities, and preconditions for the desired transformation of capitalist society.

Only after this crucial first cognitive step was taken could the social scientist turn into a partisan “socialist theorist,” who, developing emancipatory strategies for linking scientific knowledge and particular interests, was engaged in the formulation of indispensable “categorical imperatives binding political parties.”⁶⁸ Thus, it was within the concrete world of the marginalized and oppressed that the socialist theorist could complete his function, since progressive political parties were the “champions of specific interests which it is their duty to foster in every possible way.”⁶⁹ Bernstein provided an important response to Kautsky’s dominant view that the primary role of political theory was not to initiate politics but to analyze and explain social phenomena according to the “correct” Marxist method. More than anything, Bernstein wanted to combine the traditional role of a social scientist with that of the “thinker of the movement” who provided the ethical principles for concrete political action as well as analyzing its empirical presuppositions.

⁶⁶ Bernstein to Antonio Labriola, n. d., *Bernstein A*, C20.

⁶⁷ Bernstein, “Was ist Sozialismus?,” in Hirsch, *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, p. 148.

⁶⁸ Eduard Bernstein, “The Conquest of Political Power,” in *MS*, pp. 306–307.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

For these reasons, it is difficult to ignore the significance of Bernstein's constructive efforts in providing the first coherent theoretical blueprint for an evolutionary socialism whose liberal-socialist principles became even more important in the course of this century. Indeed, Bernstein's challenge to orthodox Marxism fertilized the vast field of twentieth-century progressive political thought. To this very day, the full scope of the historical consequences following his crucial intervention has not been properly recognized. The emerging rifts within Marxist socialism opened the gates to a flood of new "revisionisms," as well as to new theoretical attempts at restoring unity. Considering himself a "thinker in the Marxist tradition" despite his rejection of Hegelian categories and his obvious liberal predilections for neo-Kantian critical theory, Bernstein set an important first example for succeeding generations of socialist thinkers who added their neo-Hegelian, Freudian, and Heideggerian inclinations (among others) to a "Marxism" that had begun to investigate previously neglected dimensions.

For example, V. I. Lenin, in his famous pamphlet *What is to Be Done?*, directly responded to Bernstein's "heresies" by developing his own voluntaristic-Blanquist brand of Marxism. Georges Sorel's irrationalist syndicalism, which in turn spawned new radical socialisms of the Left and Right, was deeply influenced by Bernstein's revisionism. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, and other members of the "Frankfurt School of Social Research" reacted to Bernstein's "return to the critical moment" in socialist theory with a revival of the Hegelianized socialism of the young Marx, combined with Freud's psychological insights – a "Marxist eclecticism" celebrated in their vision of "Critical Theory."

At the same time, Bernstein's intellectual initiative also helped legitimize the growing neo-Kantian school within social democracy comprised of noted social philosophers like Karl Vorländer, Conrad Schmidt, Franz Staudinger, Max Adler, and Paul Natorp. Otto Neurath, consciously building on the epistemological premisses of Bernstein's evolutionary socialism, decisively influenced the formulation of Karl Popper's critical rationalism and the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle.⁷⁰ Finally, contemporary forms of "liberal socialism," perhaps best articulated in the works of Norberto Bobbio and Luc Ferry and Alan Renaut, can be traced back to Carlo Rosselli, Jean Jaurès, and Leon Blum – socialist thinkers heavily influenced by the "Father of Revisionism."

⁷⁰ For the connection between Bernstein's revisionism and Otto Neurath's theories, see Freudenthal, "Otto Neurath: From Authoritarian Liberalism to Empiricism," in Dascal and Grüngard, *Knowledge and Politics*, pp. 207–240.

Perhaps it is most appropriate to leave the last word on the evaluation of Eduard Bernstein's contribution to socialist theory to the Austrian party journalist, Karl Leuthner, one of his fiercest nationalist opponents in the "revisionist" camp:

[T]here is something touching about Bernstein's solicitude in analyzing, categorizing, and developing theoretical problems. People say he's hardly creative; he never managed a genuine philosophical breakthrough. Yet, he succeeded in dissolving ossified concepts, in the process endowing them with new life. He may have lacked the sudden flashes of a true genius, but steadily holding up his lamp, he moved inexorably toward new ground, illuminating a good many dark spots and uncovering previously unrecognized connections.⁷¹

⁷¹ Karl Leuthner cited in Hyrkkänen, *Sozialistische Kolonialpolitik*, p. 282.

Epilogue: evolutionary socialism at the “end of socialism”

Before exploring the contemporary relevance of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism we first ought to pose the more fundamental question: “What’s left of *any* socialism?” As we approach the millenium, it would appear that the “socialist century” is, irrevocably, over. Soviet communism has collapsed, Third World variants of Marxism-Leninism are on the wane, and the once-so-admired systems of European social democracy are seemingly exhausted. Previously dominating an OECD world based on a national manufacturing industry, the social democratic–Keynesian welfare state of Willy Brandt, François Mitterand, Bruno Kreisky, and Olof Palme has given way to the harsh realities of our post-industrial, globally integrated capitalism. Edging toward the limits of an effective “national control” of the production process, social democrats find the rules of the economic game fundamentally changed. The fiery debates of the 1970s over the implementation of a nationally based, social democratic “Third Way” – or even “Eurocommunism” – have given way to a subdued acknowledgment of the inevitability of a corporate “internationalism” with neo-classical imperatives demanding the cut-back of entitlement programs, the deregulation of markets, and effective wage controls combined with significant tax cuts for business.

These developments, combined with the fall of Soviet communism, have prompted many conservative commentators to herald the “end of socialism” *as such*, rejoicing in claims of the “fulfillment of history” in liberal capitalism, preferably that of the American persuasion.¹ And despite the surprising resurgence of religious and secular forms of nationalism, it is indeed hard to quarrel with Francis Fukuyama’s thesis that our neo-classical economic and ideological paradigm of the 1990s lacks competitors of a global stature. Consequently, even a good number of progressive thinkers have assumed an almost fatalistic posture *vis-à-vis* the seemingly inevitable globalization of capital, grudgingly confirming

¹ See, for example, Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” in *The National Interest* 16 (Summer, 1989), pp. 3–18; and *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

that socialism, understood as a distinct ideology, or “set of ideologies and its accompanying social movements,” has seen its day.² Tying with the post-modern relativism of our times, they have called for the transformation of the socialist tradition into a “cultural project.” Suspicious of any universalist “metanarrative,” they reject the essentialist Enlightenment themes of both Marx and Kant, seeking instead to deconstruct and unmask modernity’s “disciplinary” and “policing” modes of “subjugation.”

Portraying socialism as part of the problem of modernity, academic “post-modernists” like Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Judith Butler have struggled to make the “cultural Left” aware of a “politics of identity.” “Difference” and “subjectivity” are “activated” at the expense of “solidarity” and “universality”;³ deontological ethical “grand narratives” are met with stern disapproval; and Western, “logocentric” thought is perpetually “deconstructed.”⁴ While it is true that the relentless philosophical critique of Cartesian rationality has drawn due attention to the persisting relations of domination in modernity, the linguistic acrobatics of postmodernity haven’t advanced by one iota the political task of constructing social institutions capable of answering the cries of real human suffering. The denouncement of the “subject” as “fiction” has contributed to dangerous forms of aesthetic withdrawal and political detachment while privileging the ontic world of Heidegger’s “*Das Man*.” Politics degenerates into a “perpetual withholding gesture,”⁵ and theoretical assumptions are continuously “interrogated,” but never enacted or tested. Indeed, more than sixty years after Bernstein’s death, the post-modern “ontology of discord”⁶ has not been able to offer concrete sociopolitical alternatives to his evolutionary Enlightenment project of radically democratizing society through reformist measures.

The utter discreditation of Soviet-style communism and the shortcom-

² See, for example, Peter Beilharz, *Postmodern Socialism: Romanticism, City and State* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1994), p. 105; Norman Rush, “What was Socialism?,” in *The Nation* (January 24, 1994) and various responses to Rush’s article in “Socialism: An Exchange,” *The Nation* (March 7, 1994); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1991); Ernesto Laclau, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1991); and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (New York: Times Books, 1990).

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 82.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” in *Diacritics* 19 (Fall, 1983).

⁵ Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 18.

⁶ William Connolly, “Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness,” in *Political Theory* 12 (May 1984), p. 371.

ings of the theoretically impoverished and bureaucratized social democratic model notwithstanding, there seems to be plenty of unfinished business left in the “evolutionary” enterprise of extending the political ideals of the French Revolution. The “Social Question” has not disappeared; contesting the vast disparities in wealth and well-being produced by liberal capitalism remains an important political agenda.⁷ As Jürgen Habermas recently noted, there is still much to say for Bernstein’s “socialist ideal” of taming “capitalism to some point where it becomes unrecognizable as such.”⁸ Similarly, Michael Walzer emphasized that, “The best name for . . . the political creed that defends the framework and supports the necessary forms of state action for both groups and individuals, is social democracy.”⁹

Yet, the public contestation of social injustice must no longer be translated into the Marxist dream of riding the wave of history into the utopia of a unitary social whole. Socialism, understood as the complete “abolition of the commodity form” – a romantic “other” to *some* form of market economy – has indeed come to an end.¹⁰ If anything, the harsh lessons of the twentieth century have taught social democrats that socialism is neither forced collectivization plus planned economy nor the automatic gradualism of an evolutionary one-way street. As the Polish dissident Adam Michnik put it, “We are what we were thirty years ago, except that we have lost our illusions and gained in humility.”¹¹ Hence, the continued viability of any socialism lies both in its capacity for ideological renewal, that is, its ability to reconnect political practice to the core principles of social democracy.

Ideological renewal can only occur through critical self-reflection. Bernstein elevated such sincere forms of self-criticism to the *modus operandi* of his evolutionary socialism. A thorough and permanent revision of socialist theory should therefore no longer be interpreted as a disgraceful “betrayal” of the (Marxist) cause, but as an ongoing effort to forestall ideological petrification. Less exclusive, more moderate, and more eclectic than its Marxist ancestor, any viable “socialism” of the future must provide a comfortable home for the democratic critic who questions total social solutions and calls for an ethically motivated struggle against structurally embedded forms of injustice and social irresponsibility – be it

⁷ For the welter of contemporary counter-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theorizing see, for example, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer, eds. *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

⁸ Jürgen Habermas cited in *The New York Review of Books* (March 24, 1994), p. 26.

⁹ Michael Walzer, “Political Liberalism,” in *Dissent* (Spring, 1994), p. 191.

¹⁰ See also Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*.

¹¹ Adam Michnik cited in *The New York Review of Books* (March 24, 1994), p. 26.

on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation. Like Bernstein, such a critic rejects all forms of dogmatism, including that of turning evolutionary-liberal socialism into a rigid system. In our rapidly changing world, even the “revisionists” themselves must be subject to internal and external review.

By abandoning its critical character and lowering its moral sights in the name of “prudence” (also known as instrumentalism), European social democracy eventually became too affirmative – a development culminating in Chancellor Helmut Schmidt’s credo: “Each citizen must be capable of consenting to an orderly procedure of conflict settlement by compromise. He must be prepared to accept the loss of stringency and consistency that goes with that.”¹² While it is true that “democracy is the school of compromise,”¹³ the process of political bargaining ought not overlook the fundamental question of how to reconcile liberty, accountability, and democracy while maintaining the highest possible degree of individual freedom and economic equality. In order to prevent a fatal compromise of principles, the core ethical ideals of social democracy must be defended even at the risk of electoral defeat. This means that the question of socialism can never disappear into the state just as the state cannot be jettisoned in favor of a nebulous idea of “communism.” For this reason, concrete problems like authority, distributive justice, and personal liberty ought to remain the most pressing issues debated in both socialist theory and mainstream political theory.¹⁴

Indeed, the viability of social democracy depends on the institutionalized enactment of its progressive agenda, that is, its ability to reconnect political practice to the core principles of social democracy. However, this step cannot be taken without rejecting reductionistic Marxist concepts that severely curtail the vision of a genuine liberal socialism. Though European labor movements have long followed the example of the SPD in replacing Marxism as their official ideology with a theoretical pluralism that bases socialist principles equally on “Christian ethics, humanism, and classical philosophy,” many socialist intellectuals have refused to let

¹² Schmidt cited in Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, p. 63.

¹³ *PS*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Among the vast literature on this topic, important studies include: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1971); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon, 1971); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984); Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Alan Gilbert, *Democratic Individuality* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990); and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

go of the Marxist framework.¹⁵ Ridiculing “ethical foundations” for socialist theory, these stale voices of the old “New Left” continue to view socialist theory through glasses colored by decades of hegemonic Marxist conceptual categories. Though perhaps philosophically more demanding than more eclectic forms of liberal socialism, Marxist doctrine nonetheless has failed in its self-imposed task of transforming the less abstract political arena where concrete material interests compete with aesthetic ideals, cultural biases, and moral dilemmas.

Twentieth-century Marxism is guilty of what Benjamin Barber calls “The Law of Incomplete Realization.”¹⁶ Barber’s law demands that philosophical principles are to be tested against their capacity to operate when they are incompletely realized. Following this logic, Marxists can not simultaneously defend the demands of *The Communist Manifesto*, and wash their hands of the Bolshevik cult of personality and the despotism of Chinese party bureaucrats. Despite its tendency to degenerate into instrumentalism, Bernstein’s “evolutionary socialism” achieves much higher marks on Barber’s scale.

Consequently, Bernstein’s quest should be seen as the finest vision social democracy has to offer: a consequent reformism aimed at extending democracy understood as a “cooperative ideal.” Challenging the antithesis between liberalism and socialism proclaimed by generations of Marxist thinkers, the modern descendants of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism call for an ideological renewal of social democracy based on the re-evaluation of non-Marxist socialist currents and their historical connections to liberal thought.

Indeed, the future of socialism seems now to hang in the balance of its reorientation towards the liberal tradition and its renewed emphasis on democratic and civic practices.¹⁷ As Jeremy Rifkin points out, the profound technological and social changes brought on by the unfolding Information Age revolution will force every country to rethink long-held assumptions about the nature of politics, work, and citizenship.¹⁸ In our

¹⁵ 1959 SPD Godesberg Program, cited in Meyer, *Demokratischer Sozialismus – Soziale Demokratie*, p. 86.

¹⁶ Benjamin R. Barber, “An Epitaph for Marxism,” in *Social Science and Modern Society* 33.1 (November/December 1995), p. 24.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 26; Peter Osborne, ed. *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Chantal Mouffe, “Toward a Liberal Socialism?,” in *Dissent* (Winter, 1993), pp. 81–87; and Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *Political Philosophy, vol III: From the Rights of Man to the Republican Idea*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Jeremy Rifkin, “Civil Society in the Information Age,” in *The Nation* (February 26, 1996), pp. 11–16; and *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995). See also Andrew Arato and Joshua Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

era of government and corporate downsizing, special attention ought to be paid to the central role of civil society as the rapidly growing "Third Sector" between the market and government spheres which harbors the opportunity to create millions of new jobs. While the goal of ideological renewal should certainly *not* be the abandonment of social egalitarianism in favor of abstract notions of liberty, it is imperative that twenty-first-century social democrats re-envision politics, economics, and society in accordance with some of the radical-liberal premises from which Marxism departed in the second half of the nineteenth century. A new politics of evolutionary socialism must firmly commit itself to intersystemic strategies aimed at advancing political and economic democracy and civil rights, enhancing the social choices of the disadvantaged, and pursuing deliberative, rational forms of public discourse.

Therefore, the most appropriate vehicle for liberal-socialist demands remains the liberal language of rights which, as Bernstein argued so forcefully, best articulates progressive principles: the expansion of personal rights at the expense of property rights, thus making socially consequential power accountable to the will of all citizens.¹⁹ Social democracy cannot simply jettison the specific institutional form of modern liberal democracy without risking the reunification of state and society in a totalizing way and thus the surrender of representative democracy as such.²⁰

The central tasks of *extending* political and economic democracy and reconstructing the sphere of civil society between the market and the state means that the old socialist goal of "overcoming the capitalist system" must be abandoned. Here, Bernstein needs just as much revision as Marx, for the post-World War II era has clearly indicated the limits of a piecemeal reformism in a capitalist system which produces both social inequality and the revenues needed for redistributive welfare measures.²¹ This appreciation of the market as intrinsically connected to liberal democracy may strike inveterate Marxists (some of whom still advocate political control by workers' councils) as "defeatist."²² So be it. Michael Harrington has put it best when he insisted that modern social democracy

¹⁹ This is the thesis of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought*, a study that argues in favor of "post-liberal democracy."

²⁰ See Agnes Heller, "On Formal Democracy," in John Keane, ed. *Civil Society and the State* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 131–133.

²¹ This point has been made in great detail by Norberto Bobbio, *Which Socialism?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 100–101.

²² See, for example, Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), pp. 109–113.

must understand itself “on the basis of ethical values and not simply in terms of the material interests of a single class.”²³

Is therefore the tension between ethical socialist principles and the necessary instrumentalism that comes from accepting *some* form of market economy unresolvable? Stated in such absolute terms, the answer is yes. But the inescapability from some instrumentalism under conditions of advanced capitalism does not mean that there isn’t significant room for change and improvement. In fact, ethical socialists fulfill the important task of reminding *Praktiker* who separate values from political activities of the importance of ideals guiding practice. At the same time, ethical idealists must be made to recognize the necessity of pragmatic strategies in democratic politics. Without relying on absolute assurances, progressives are called upon to issue political judgments under ever-changing social conditions that may encourage a variety of competing and conflicting maxims of choice.

The celebration of the quest for this elusive “middle way” is Bernstein’s legacy to socialist theory. Necessary instrumental considerations of proficient means must be balanced with core principles of “responsiveness to individual will, non-arbitrariness, social efficiency and economy, fairness in distributions and in distinctions of recognition and reward.”²⁴ The transcendental character of a socialist ethic prescribes the moral duty of striving for the realization of the Enlightenment ideals while making their full implementation impossible. As Charles W. Anderson has pointed out, the justification for such a “middle way” lies not in its appeal to considerations of first philosophy, but in its search for the best fit between theory and practice, continuously taking stock and reappraising its convictions and commitments to the ideals of good practice, “in the light of the intrinsic aims of the enterprise itself.”²⁵ Rather than furnishing all-encompassing philosophical systems or dogmatic truths, Bernstein defined the task of the socialist theorist as supplying the “theoretical outline of a fundamentally reformist social democratic politics.”²⁶

True, Bernstein’s delicate balancing act of principles and political effectiveness could neither prevent the growth of social democratic instrumentalism nor the birth of a soviet-style voluntarist fanaticism. There is no doubt, however, that these extreme positions have weakened the critical impulse in socialism and engulfed the entire socialist project in a profound sense of disillusionment. In addition, social democracy’s lack

²³ Harrington, *Socialism Past and Future*, p. 276.

²⁴ Charles W. Anderson, *Pragmatic Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. x–xi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 189.

²⁶ Bernstein, *Wie eine Revolution zu Ende ging*, p. 9.

of vision has led to its poor theoretical response *vis-à-vis* the rising “post-material” forces of the ecological Left and the New Right. Without the theoretical and institutional renewal of socialism, the 150-year paradigm of social democracy is in grave danger of slipping into historical insignificance.

Thus, there is no closure on Bernstein’s quest for evolutionary socialism. It will continue in those political thinkers and social reformers who understand their task as a permanent balancing act aimed at increasing the correspondence of ethical principles and political *praxis*. Like Bernstein, they will reject the intellectual *hubris* of Marxism and settle for the more modest role of mediating between different systems of thought in the name of a fundamental reformist politics which seeks to approximate the great ideal of social justice. As Benjamin Barber put it, “[P]atience and humility remain the chief democratic virtues, especially for social democrats.”²⁷ Evolutionary socialism presupposes tolerance, the willingness to engage with political opponents, and, above all, the willingness to change. “After all,” Bernstein once noted, “time is the greatest revisionist.”²⁸

²⁷ Barber, “An Epitaph for Marxism,” p. 26.

²⁸ Bernstein, “Der Marx-Cultus und das Recht der Revision,” p. 18.

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